



THE OWNER OF THE LAZY D

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The Owner of the Lazy D

by William Patterson White

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Published August, 1919

CHAPTER I

THE dusty young man riding the wiry little dun was singing as if he hadn't a care in the world:

"Around her neck she wore a yellow ribbon;

She wore it in December and in the month of May.

I asked her why she wore the yellow ribbon;

She said because her lover was far, far away!"

A not too distant rifle cracked a period. Zung-g-g! The bullet ripped past not far overhead.

"Good line, but high," remarked the dusty young man, cocking a cheerful eye at the quartermile sweep of rising ground in front of his horse's nose. "Does the gentleman mean me?" he continued in a drawl. "He couldn't 'a' heard me singin' through half a mile o' solid earth, an' he couldn't 'a' expected to drill me through the same. No, not the way they're loadin' shells nowadays. Still--"

The drawling voice trailed into silence as the rider drew a well-kept Winchester from under his leg. Clicking a cartridge into the chamber,

he rode forward to where a ragged outcrop crowned the rising ground. In the rear of the rocky scarp he dismounted and flung the reins over his horse's head. He crawled rapidly round the outcrop and settled himself between two boulders.

His cheerful eyes had lost none of their joyousness. Darkly blue and very bright, their dancing merriness belied the unmistakable strength of the straight nose and the wide mouth.

"Fine!" announced the young man, when one rapid glance had taken in all there was to see. "Fine, an' then some!"

Comfortably flat on his stomach, elbows on the ground, square chin cupped in the palms of two lean, brown hands, he stared at what promised to be a fairly moving little drama.

From where he lay the ground fell away in a mile-long slope to the thin, double line of cottonwoods fringing a meandering creek. Half-way down the slope, where the combination of a small hollow, a dozen tamaracks, and an up-flung lip of rock afforded shelter, a mite of a fire burned fitfully. On one side of the fire two hog-tied yearlings beat the earth with their outraged heads and groaned dismally. On the opposite side of the fire two horses stood quietly. Beyond the horses, one among the tamaracks, the other behind the lip of rock, two individuals lay flat and eyed the landscape below them through the sights of their Winchesters.

"Rustlers!" drawled the young man. "The other outfit is shorely cautious a lot," he added after a moment, with a slow smile. "Only the one shot, an' that so high she sailed clean over the ridge!"

Interestedly his gaze traveled across and across the face of the flat beyond the creek, and the scarred slope of a ridge beyond the flat. Nothing but bunch-grass moved in the breeze. He had not expected

that any living thing would; but he was a thorough person, efficient in all that he did.

From the unprofitable searching of the flat the blue eyes skimmed the lines of the cottonwoods marching along the banks of the creek.

"They're Injunin' along behind the cut-bank o' the creek," he mused. "That's what I'd do if I was a posse surround 'em, you betcha! An' them two rustlers know it, too."

He could see the two among the tamaracks turning their heads toward each other. They appeared to argue. The slighter one shook his head determinedly. His tall companion rolled across to him, seized him by the ankles, and dragged him backward.

This evidently decided the matter. The slighter fellow instantly jammed his Winchester into its scabbard, mounted a horse on the fly, and was off up the slope, quiring like mad.

His comrade, equally swift, tore away on a course paralleling the banks of the creek. Immediately several rifles among the cottonwoods crackled hysterically; but both the fleeing riders raced onward unchecked.

When the young man between the boulders saw one of the rustlers heading in his direction, he made as if to shove his Winchester forward; but he thought better of that. Instead, he scuttled crablike round the rear of the outcrop, ran to his saddle, and came back with his rope. Peering cautiously over the edge, he beheld the advancing rider within six jumps of him.

As the horse flashed past, the young man's wrist flipped outward and downward. He braced himself backward, digging his heels into the ground, the rope snubbed over his hip. Forefooted, the horse stood

on his nose and piled his rider.

The young man dropped his rope and sprang forward, pulling his six-shooter; but there was no need of lethal weapons. A twenty-foot flight through the air and a landing made mainly on one's stomach are not conducive to combativeness.

Gasping painfully for breath, the erstwhile rider was pulled over on his back. The young man knelt beside him. Blue eyes looked into soft amber ones. There was now a rather terrorstricken expression in the young man's face; for the hat of the individual fighting for breath had fallen off, and above the amber eyes was a healthy mop of disheveled, honey-colored hair honeycolored hair with hairpins in it. Hairpins? Exactly.

It was a red pair of lips, indeed, between which the white teeth showed, and an angry bruise on one cheek did not derogate from the startling fact that this rustler was the prettiest girl the young man had ever seen. An instant only he stared. Then, without hesitation, he fled to his boulders and began pumping lead at three earnest citizens who were climbing the hill at the full stretch of their ponies.

The first shot dropped a pony. The horseman expertly disengaged his feet from the stirrups and flopped down behind the dead animal. The other two men whirled their mounts and rode for the cottonwoods. The young man grinned and flanked them with bullets.

Smack! The fellow behind the dead horse drove a bullet against the face of the boulder on the young man's left. Rock splinters stung his forehead. He snuggled close to the ground and planted two shots in the body of the dead horse.

"I don't want to down the fool," he observed calmly.

"Then if you don't, I do!" chimed in an irritated voice in his immediate rear. "Get up, will yuh, and give me a chance?"

The young man edged to one side and glanced over his shoulder. Ten feet away knelt the girl. Her hat was clamped down over her eyes, and she was handling a cocked rifle.

"Y' all right now?" queried the young man irrelevantly.

"No thanks to you if I am!" replied the lady with spirit. "Would you mind telling me why you first rope my horse and then about-face and fight for me? At least, I infer you are fighting for me, in spite of your remarking that you don't intend to kill Tom Johnson down there. Who are you, anyway?"

"Me? Oh, I'm just a man. I--"

"I didn't take you for a cow, stranger. What are your politics?"

"That depends, ma'am. I ain't a frequent voter."

She gave him an odd look, and turned to glance at her horse, which had risen to its feet and was cropping grass. When she faced him again, she was smiling.

"Stranger," she said, "let's drag it!"

"No sense in danglin'," he agreed amiably. "Can yore horse carry yuh?"

"He can walk, anyway," she answered, and absent-mindedly started to rise to her feet.

With a fierce grunt the young man bounced upward and fairly smothered her to earth.

"Haven't yuh any better sense than that?" he demanded gruffly. "Those fellahs down yonder have rifles. There's no real reason to keep 'em from makin' a center shot once in a while, an' once is 'most always enough."

"I don't know why I did start to stand up," she said shamefacedly, as he got to his own knees and helped her to hers. "I--I forgot. I guess I never did such a foolish thing before."

"Don't do it again, then," he admonished, assisting her down-hill to her horse.

"You stood up, though. Why?"

"Me? Oh, I guess I just forgot, too."

"It's likely, quite likely. First you land me and my horse on our heads, then you fight for me, and now you protect me from possible bullets with your own body. You're an odd number! Are you by any chance a deputy?"

With a quick motion she flicked open his vest. Her amber eyes searched for the betraying star and found it not. He laughed lightly.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he assured her.

The amber eyes darkened.

"I'm not afraid of you!" she flashed. "I'm not afraid of anybody."

She stooped for her bridle. Before she was in the saddle he flitted to his boulders once more, to send one shot into the dead horse and one among the cottonwoods.

"Hurry!" she commanded when he returned to her. "That Injun trick may keep 'em amused and where they are, but I'll gamble the limit they're trotting up and down the creek trying to surround us again!"

"How many are there?" he inquired, as he mounted.

"Ten or a dozen all of Tom Johnson's gang," she replied indifferently.

"Straight for that draw, stranger. We'll throw 'em off. I'll show you. I wonder how many chased dad," she added reflectively.

"Dad the man with you?"

She nodded, glancing sidewise at him out of her amber eyes.

"I'm not worried," she said. "He always gets away, my dad. I was merely trying to figure out how many were after us."

"Us!" In spite of the fact that the word implied a certain degree of intimacy with a rustler, the blue-eyed young man experienced a real thrill. It began somewhere in the small of his back and branched out into both his shoulders.

"What's the matter cold?" asked the lady solicitously.

"No, ma'am, no. Pin stuck in me, I s'pose. Glad I didn't damage yore hoss."

"You didn't, stranger, but you might have."

Again she gave him the odd look with which she had favored him there beside the outcrop. She lapsed into a silence which was not broken for nearly two hours, during which time they rode the draws religiously. At last, coming to a place where a long draw forked, she checked her horse. Turning in the saddle, she stared at him steadfastly. In spite of her brass-studded chaps, her man's shirt and

vest, he thought she looked all that was feminine and lovely.

"It's shorely wonderful what the Western climate does!" he remarked, suddenly moved to speech.

"Meaning?"

"Everything, ma'am, everything," he explained.

Since he continued to gaze upon her with an admiration that was as patent as it was sincere, the explanation was not convincing. She eyed him doubtfully for a space.

"Never mind!" she said finally. "You haven't answered my question as to your politics. Honest, now are you for us or against us?"

"I'm for you, ma'am straight ticket!"

She passed this over and tried again.

"I wonder if you really understand!"

"What, ma'am?"

"I guess you really are a stranger, after all."

"I may be a stranger now, ma'am, but I ain't aimin' to stay one. I like this county. The climate's shore amazin', an' the citizens ain't mudturtles so's yuh could notice it. I like life, I do, an' I guess this here is it!"

"It may not be as healthy as you think," hazarded the girl, a dazzling smile taking the edge off the sinister meaning of her words.

"Not healthy? Well, I always carry plenty o' medicine. Habit I got."

Tenderly, almost lovingly, his brown fingers caressed his shell-filled belts. The girl smiled anew, her amber eyes sparkling.

"Do you know," she exclaimed, "I like you! I wish--"

She abruptly stopped speaking, her expression turning somber on the instant. He waited.

"Tell me what yore wish is," he urged after an interval, "an' I'll get it for yuh."

"Thanks!" she countered dryly. "I'll let you know if the wish becomes too overpowering. In the meantime, if you ride down this left-hand fork, you'll come to the Plain Edge and Virgin City trail. North for Plain Edge, south for Virgin City. For your well-meant efforts in my interest I thank you. Good-bye!"

She leaned across, holding out her hand. He took it gently.

"Ma'am," he answered, releasing her fingers, "yuh'll see me again soon."

"If you have a glimmer of sense I won't!" was her somewhat inelegant retort.

He raised a questioning eyebrow, the cheerful grin illumining his sunburnt face. Slowly he dragged off his hat. He was in no hurry to be gone.

At this juncture there was a sudden scurry of hoofs, and out of the right-hand fork of the draw swept five bunched horsemen. The girl jerked her pony round to face the newcomers. The young man put on his hat. When the riders arrived, he was rolling a cigarette one-handed. He lit the white roll and puffed luxuriously, staring at the line

of hostile faces out of speculative eyes.

He did not appear in the least daunted by the sinister array. He folded his hands on his saddle-horn and continued to smoke and stare. He believed in his heart that he had never seen a worse-appearing set of characters north of old Mexico. They looked like murderers. They might be almost anything.

"Who are yuh, stranger?" demanded the tallest and oldest of the five, a man with the face of a fallen angel.

"Me?" smiled the young man. "I'm a traveler a towerist. I was born about twentyeight years ago, on a mornin' in May, when the hills were white with snow, in a yaller house with green shutters period. There was a red barn back of it, where we kept the cows period. This here little dun boss reminds me o' the house. That's why I bought him. Anythin' else yuh'd like to know? Just ask. I ain't proud. I'll oblige 'most anybody."

The fallen angel opened his mouth to speak, his right hand dropping swiftly. The young man on the dun made no appreciable movement; yet, before his own itching fingers closed on the gun-butt, the fallen angel perceived that the other man's Colt was staring him out of countenance.

"Don't go draggin' at any guns," the young man cautioned plaintively. "Guns make me nervous, guns do. So you see, mister, if yore friends go for to ventilate me, I'll just naturally shake loose all six loads right plumb through yore liver. That's right keep yore arms a cuddlin' yore ears!"

He paused. Some one snickered. It was the girl.

"Say, Lanky," she remarked sharply, "since when have you had a

license to question my friends?"

The fallen angel turned his head. All save the young man gazed at the young woman.

"How do yuh mean, Sis?" queried a slim youngster with a broken nose. "He's a stranger, this gent."

"Well, seeing that he stood off Tom Johnson's gang for me, and saved my life to boot, he isn't such a total stranger. I'm calling him my friend anyway."

Their eyes swung wonderingly from the girl to the man with the ready Colt. The girl explained more fully. Lanky's Lucifer-like features positively beamed.

"Stranger," he said, "yo're all right! I don't care none who yuh are yo're all right. I'd admire to shake, if--"

He gazed meaningly at the muzzle of the sixshooter.

"That's all right," responded the young man, bolstering his gun and extending his hand. "No hard feelin's on my part."

"See yuh again, stranger," vouchsafed Lucifer. "Just now we got pressin' business some- 'eres else. Go home with Sis an' rest yore hat. Glad to have ye. So-long!"

The five evil-looking citizens raced away in the direction from which the girl and the young man had come.

"It isn't really necessary, their going," she said. "Dad'll get away all right; but that's Lanky and the boys all over. They want to double-cinch everything. Well, let's be going!"

She looked up at him with a bright smile. He pointed up the left-hand fork.

"I thought yuh showed me the way to the Plain Edge trail," he said.

"That was then. , Now's now. . Better come, stranger! Our cook's a whizzer. But, of course, if you don't care to accept Lanky's invitation, why--"

She shrugged expressive shoulders, her amber eyes sparkling at him.

"I'd a heap rather it was yore invitation," he drawled hopefully.

"My dear Mr. Stranger, preserver of my father's charming daughter, and all the rest of it, you are hereby invited to visit the family mansion. How's that?"

CHAPTER II

THE two reached the ranch-house in all the splendor of the sunset glow. The number of buildings betokened a large ranch. Besides the ranch-house there were two bunk-houses, a fortlike, sod-walled storehouse, and a blacksmithshop. In the rear were three high-fenced corrals.

Circling the buildings, the two approached the nearest and smallest of the corrals. On the top bar of the gate a man sat, his shirt showing white in the fading light. Between his teeth he was humming "Jack of Diamonds."

"Stranger," said the girl suddenly, leaning ever so slightly toward the young man, "what may I call you?"

"Gilmore, ma'am--Dal Gilmore."

The man on the gate jumped to the ground and came forward to meet the pair on horseback. The girl slid from the saddle and waved a hand toward the dismounting Gilmore.

"This is Mr. Gilmore, Tom," she announced. "He's a friend of mine. Mr. Gilmore, my brother, Mr. Stuart."

The two young men shook hands. Even in the half light Gilmore could see that Tom Stuart greatly resembled his sister, and seemed to be of about the same age. He wondered if they were twins. Stuart was understood to say that he was glad to meet his sister's friend; after which he stood back and narrowly observed the friend as he stripped saddle and bridle and turned the dun into the corral.

Gilmore, from beneath a lowered hat-brim, perceived that Mr. Stuart, while in the act of lighting a cigarette, contrived to illumine the Diamond A brand on the dun's hip.

"Couldn't wait for his sister to tell him," reflected Gilmore contemptuously.

He followed Miss Stuart to the ranch-house, Tom Stuart walking in heavy silence at her side. At the door Stuart, leaning forward, touched his sister's wrist.

"Jack Shaw's here," he said.

Miss Stuart paused with her hand on the latch.

"Then you take Jack Shaw and yourself, and anybody else that's about," ordered she, "and go help dad and the boys. Tom Johnson's gang is after 'em. You'll find them somewhere beyond the Forked Draw."

"I will, hey?" her brother almost shouted. "Then why didn't yuh tell me before? Say, what do yuh--"

"Oh, shut up!" returned Miss Stuart with sisterly politeness, flinging wide the door. "Mr. Gilmore, won't you come in?"

The living-room which Gilmore entered was a large one. At one end was a huge, empty fireplace, at the other an open doorway revealed the dining room, where a solitary man sat eating at a long table. Toward this doorway hastened Tom Stuart.

The girl ringed her hat expertly over one prong of a stand of mule-deer antlers nailed between two windows. She pushed a heavy lock of honey-colored hair out of her eyes, and pretended to adjust the wick of the lamp on the table in the middle of the room. Behind her Gilmore waited, his expression wooden, his quick eyes busy.

"Say, Jack!" said Tom Stuart, halting in the dining room doorway. "Dad an' the boys are havin' a brush with the Johnson outfit. You 'n' me might as well go see about it, huh?"

"Shore," assented the lone diner, and brought the meal to a close by wiping his hands on his chaps and kicking his chair backward to the wall.

He was a middle-sized, pony-built individual, this Jack Shaw. Shorter by three good inches than Dal Gilmore, he nevertheless impressed even the casual observer as the possessor of unusual strength. His shoulders were broad, out of all proportion to his size, and his arms were as long as an ape's. A forehead the least bit reptilian, and a hawk nose did not add grace to a face already burdened with a thin, cruel mouth and a jutting, heavy chin. No, the most charitably inclined could not have called Mr. Shaw prepossessing.

On their hurried way out Tom Stuart introduced the two men. Gilmore thrust out his hand, and the other seized it in a clamp-like grip, his hard gray eyes glinting coldly in the lamplight. To keep his hand from being crushed to limpness, Gilmore was compelled to exert all his strength. As it was, a gentle perspiration started at the edge of his black hair.

"Glad to know yuh," announced Shaw, his amiable tone at total variance with the light in his cold, sardonic eyes. "See yuh again maybe."

Gilmore sensed the significance in the pause between the last two words. He smiled pleasantly, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Yuh will," he assured the other. "Yuh'll see quite a lot o' me maybe!"

Shaw's eyes narrowed. Then he grinned mirthlessly, nodded, and vanished in the wake of Tom Stuart.

Miss Stuart went to the door and stood leaning against the jamb till the drum of hoof-beats dwindled and died.

"You don't care what you say," she observed, "or to whom you say it, do you?"

"It depends, ma'am," drawled Gilmore plaintively. "How about the other fellah? Ain't I somebody?"

"I'm afraid you are," she murmured with deep meaning. "Just how much of a somebody you are is what I'd like to know. Come!"

When each had washed face and hands in a dish-pan set on a broad bench beside the kitchen door, she led the way to the dining room. A widely-smiling Chinese stuck a cue-wrapped bullet-head

through a doorless aperture in a side wall. He mowed at them bobblingly and withdrew his head with the suddenness of a snappingturtle. Miss Stuart pulled out the chair at the lower end of the table and sat down.

"Sit there," she said, indicating the chair on her right. "Dinner'll be ready in a minute."

Lazily she tipped back on the two rear legs of her chair. Gilmore could feel her amber eyes searching his face. He did not return her gaze. Instead, he scrutinized with careful interest a Sioux saddle hanging on the wall.

"Do you know where you are?" she demanded after a moment.

"Shore, ma'am," he replied with a quick smile. "I'm at yore ranch. That's enough for 'most anybody."

Her eyes wandered to a cowskin covering an oak chest in a corner of the room. His gaze followed hers. On the cowskin the brand was plainly visible.

"Ever see that brand before?" she asked without turning her head.

"No, don't think I ever did," he admitted. "It looks like it might be a hash knife or soniethin'."

"It is a hash knife, and this is the Hash Knife ranch. It belongs to my father, Alec Stuart. I am Louise Stuart. Now do you understand?"

"Shore! I've been a wonderin' what yore first name might be."

"Quit it, can't you? You're not a fool. I can see you're not. Now you listen to what I say. Lanky and the boys saw you wittame this afternoon. If they hadn't, I'd have seen that you headed for the Plain

Edge and Virgin City trail; but they saw us together, and they'll ask me questions later. I'll have to be able to answer those questions intelligently. That's why I sent Tom and Jack Shaw out to help dad and the boys so that you could talk to me with no one to overhear. Sing Fah's deaf and dumb, so fly at it!"

He stared at her blankly.

"Yuh'll have to explain, ma'am," he chided gently; "me bein' a stranger, an'--"

The front legs of Louise Stuart's chair struck the floor with a crash. She twisted her body sidewise to face him, her rigid forefinger leveled at his chin.

"Perhaps you don't know that this is Glenn County?" she exclaimed heatedly. "Perhaps you don't know that there's a cattle war between the Hash Knife and V Up-and-Down on one side and the Lazy D and Triangle O on the other? Perhaps you don't know that the Lazy D and Triangle O are hiring gunmen? Which being so, a plain statement of your sentiments would be appreciated!"

"Why not let yore brother or Jack Shaw ask me questions?" he parried.

"Because there'd be a shooting. You might kill one of my brothers before the rest of them or Jack Shaw killed you. I don't want any shooting here."

"Why Jack Shaw? Wouldn't yore brothers be enough?"

"They would; but Jack's a a devil. He's naturally suspicious, he's always practising the draw, and he's mean to his horses. What more do you want?"

"That's enough! A combination like that in a man'll make him do anythin'. The sports he's downed, now did he drill 'em in the back or just put wolf-poison in their grub?"

"You needn't be sarcastic. Jack Shaw has killed two both of 'em bad, and no loss to the community. He's no coward, and you can take it from me that he's a good man to walk around."

"That's good hearin', but I've always found a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. I guess Jack Shaw'd turn out a heap interest in' fellah to know."

"Suit yourself. I've warned you. Now--"

"Ma'am, excuse me, but would yuh mind tellin' me the rights o' this fraycas between these here four ranches?"

"Where do you stand?" she persisted, her voice hardening and her amber eyes beginning to glitter dangerously.

"Why, ma'am, how do I know?" he said helplessly. "I'm comin' no'th from New Mexico, a huntin' new scenery an' a job. I've found the scenery all right, but no job. Till I locate that job, I dunno where I stand I don't, ma'am, honest."

"Answer me! At first your evasions didn't seem to matter a great deal; but now they do, and you can just make up your mind that you won't leave this room till you tell me what I want to know. Now answer me!"

"I've done told yuh, ma'am, over an' over, I'm from New Mexico, an' I want a job, an' I dunno much about this case. Of course, even in New Mexico we've heard rumors, but we don't know the truth. If yuh could help me out, ma'am, by givin' me the rights of the fraycas between the four ranches. I might be able to tell yuh what yuh want to know."

"That's easy," she said, beginning to cut a steak which the dumb Chinaman slid noiselessly in front of her. "The Lazy D claimed one of our yearlings. We refused to surrender the cow, of course, and they began to rustle our calves. Matters have gone from bad to worse. The V Up-and-Down that's Jack Shaw sided with us, and the Triangle O chipped in with them. In the last year there's been quite a lot of shooting. Two of our boys have gone over. The Lazy D has lost, three, and the Triangle O one. Quite a few have been wounded on both sides. At present the county is pretty evenly divided. Nearly all the men in it, even the inhabitants of the towns, have taken sides. So you see the weary traveler is open to suspicion. He may be a gun man or a deputy. You don't seem to realize how serious it all is. If you had met Lanky and the boys alone, you'd undoubtedly have been shot for your fresh remarks. A flippant demeanor is not a paying investment in this region."

"What is your definition of gunman?" he asked over the rim of his coffee-cup.

"One who kills for hire," was her prompt reply.

"Then by neither inclination nor habit am I a gunman. I've never killed a man yet, an' I never will unless I'm shoved. I'm a peaceable citizen on the lookout for a job, like I told yuh."

His frank smile and merry eyes had been having their effect. Miss Stuart's misgivings, if not utterly dispelled, were at least lulled for the time being.

"As I understand it," he casually observed, stirring his fourth cup of coffee, "both sides are rus well, brandin' each other's cows free an' promiscuous?"

"One side is the Lazy D and the Triangle O," she retorted coldly. "We brand our own only don't make any mistake about that!"

"How about the V Up-an'-Down?" This with a quizzical glance.

"The V Up-and-Down is our ally. Of course, it's honest."

"With an owner who's a killer an' mean to his bosses, it would be!" She shot him a suspicious glance. He regarded her innocently. "Then, as I see it," he continued softly, "the Lazy D an' Triangle O outfits are rustlers, while the Hash Knife an' V Up-an'-Down are shore enough pillars o' society!"

"If we're not 'pillars,' as you call it," she said warmly, "we are at least honest. We defend our rights, that's all."

He did not appear to hear what she was saying. His attention was centered on an endeavor to balance a spoon on the edge of his cup. Miss Stuart watched him with growing irritation. She wondered why she was answering his questions. She was not usually so complaisant. Again, still without looking in her direction, he spoke:

"Which ranch was here first the Lazy D or the Hash Knife?"

"The Lazy D. We threw down a couple of years later."

"Ever stop to think how easy it is to change a Lazy D to a Hash Knife?"

Adroitly his lean, brown hands pinched the soft center from a slice of bread. He laid the hard crust on the table. It made almost a perfect Lazy D. From another slice of bread he fashioned a T. This he placed upright on the horizontal line of the D. The implication was only too manifest.

"If you think" she burst out in quick anger.

"I ain't thinkin'," he interrupted, busy again with his spoon-balancing. "I'm just showin' yuh somethin', that's all."

"I know just what you mean," she returned, her voice trembling; "but I don't know why I sit here and let you question me you, who may be anything! However, we'll decide what to do about it when the boys come home."

"Suppose I don't just feel like waitin' till the boys sift in?"

"You'll wait."

"Who'll make me?"

"I will," was her tranquil reply. "You see, from the doorway at your back Sing Fah has been covering you for the past fifteen minutes. If you turn your head, he'll shoot."

At that instant from the kitchen came the thud of potatoes dropping into a dish-pan. Gilmore threw back his head and laughed quite frankly. He lowered his chin to look into the twin muzzles of a stubby derringer.

"You're not quite so smart, after all!" the lady snapped viciously. "I've got the drop!"

"What'll yuh do with it?" he asked tranquilly, his hands flat on the table.

"Shoot you if you budge. I don't want to, because you helped me out there on the range, but I will if you don't keep your hands where they are!"

"Well, now, this is shore a nice way to treat visitors invite 'em to pay yuh a visit, an' then hold 'em up! Yuh don't look like a road-agent, not really."

The amber eyes darkened. The red lips straightened. The slender hand that gripped the butt of the derringer held steady as a church. The girl made no reply to his verbal thrusts.

He tried again:

"Yuh couldn't shoot me, ma'am! Yuh just couldn't, an' yuh know it."

"You make one quick motion, and see what happens!"

"Well, now, maybe ye would, maybe ye would. Can't tell what a woman'll do, not nohow. But say, what's goin' to happen when the boys an' Jack Shaw come home?"

"You'll be investigated pretty thoroughly you can make up your mind to that. I don't believe you've given me a straight answer yet!"

"Why, ma'am, as if I'd lie to yuh!" he drawled, as if with injured feelings. "What I have told yuh was the truth what there was of it."

"Exactly!" she flashed triumphantly. "I knew you were keeping something back!"

"Only my star, ma'am."

"Your star!" she faltered.

"Shore! I'm a deputy sheriff."

"You lied to me! You said you weren't a deputy!"

"No, ma'am, I didn't. You said I wasn't. You throwed my vest open; didn't see my star, 'cause it was pinned inside my shirt, an' yuh said I wasn't a deputy. I didn't say nothin'. I just laughed. It's all like I said. I'm a stranger here. I'm from New Mexico. I'm lookin' for a job, an' I don't expect to find it till I report to the sheriff in Plain Edge. I aim to find the ins an' outs o' this Glenn County rustlin', ma'am, an' yore invite was too good to pass up. I figured yuh might likely tell me somethin'."

"You came to spy!" The scorn in her tone was terrific.

"No, ma'am; not the way yuh mean," he denied gently. "There's two sides to every fraycas, an' I want to know both sides of this deal before I start. That's why I come here with yuh. I wanted yuh to tell me. Well, yuh did, an' accordin' to yuh it's all the Lazy D's fault. I'll hear what they have to say, an' then, between the two of yuh, I ought to know somethin' about the rights of the matter see?"

CHAPTER III

THE girl stared at him in blank amazement. She could hardly credit her ears. That a deputy sheriff should calmly confess his identity and his purpose was almost unbelievable.

"We'll see what the boys have to say," she observed, following a tense silence.

"No, I wouldn't do that," coolly advised Gilmore. "I just wouldn't, if I were yuh. Yuh'll be obstructin' law an' order, if yuh do."

"Well, of all the nervy individuals, you do put the hat on the climax! You admit you're a deputy, and then suggest that I should allow you to depart in peace. Not to-day! No, Mr. Dal Gilmore if that really is your name, which I doubt here you stay till the family passes on your case."

"An' Jack Shaw. Don't forget him!"

"You'll soon wish you'd never heard of Jack. He's the most radical one of the lot."

"I guess likely; but what I can't see is why, if yo're all so honest an' straight as a string an' things like that, yo're not willin' to let me drift along 'bout my business. If there's nothin' crooked goin' on, what yuh afraid of? Why do yuh jump sideways at deputies? I'm askin' yuh, ma'am, why?"

"I shan't bandy words with you spy!" she retorted furiously.

"Good reason why!" he replied equably.

"We are not rustlers!"

"I didn't say yuh was. Why, ma'am, I wouldn't think of sayin' such a thing. Yuh told me yoreself yuh was honest. I'd believe yuh quicker'n I would myself. May I smoke, ma'am?"

"No keep your hands still!"

"I am, I am. They ain't budged a hair since yuh first drawed that derringer on me; but I'd like one pill just one small pill, ma'am, an' I won't bother yuh no more."

"You won't bother me. Don't worry about that!"

"I'm not. No need. I know just what's goin' to happen. But say, why don't yuh call in yore deaf-an'-dumb wonder an' hog-tie me? It's just a suggestion. Seein' yuh holdin' up that baby cannon so long made me think yore arm must be tired."

and expression, even his tone, were most solicitous; but Miss Stuart was not impressed. She did not deign to reply. Above the derringer's twin barrels her amber eyes continued to stare coldly into his.

"Kind of unhandy havin' help that can't hear," he pursued pleasantly. "Ever try riggin' a string to his big toe?"

Hopefully he waited for the smile. No smile. Undaunted, he tried again:

"Do yuh know, the way yuh wear yore hair is mighty pretty so fluffy like, an' soft round yore ears! I dunno when I've seen hair pleased me better. Seen a lot, too, if I am young still. Would yuh mind lettin' me--"

"Shut up!" she interrupted sharply. "I've heard enough from you."

"Can't I talk?" he pleaded.

"No, you can't!"

"Why, say, when a road-agent holds up a stage, he lets the driver cuss all he likes, but you--"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, all right! Certainly, ma'am; anything to oblige. If yuh don't mind, can I breathe now an' then? I ain't cashed yet, an' it's really necessary some."

There followed a long silence, unbroken save for the ticking of an alarm-clock in the livingroom. All was silent in the kitchen. Gilmore wondered whether the cook was watching him from the doorway. Probably Sing Fah was doing so, for the Chinese are a quick-witted race.

His left leg was beginning to numb. He had been working it quite steadily for the past ten minutes.

Suddenly Miss Stuart felt a light touch on her left arm. Her nerves being under somewhat of a strain, she involuntarily started and glanced down. In that unguarded instant Gilmore threw himself half-way across the table, and seized the gun with one hand and her wrist with the other.

Bang! The little gun flashed and roared. The ticking in the next room ceased instantly, and there was a tiny clatter of something falling off a table.

"Kind of handy havin' a deaf cook, after all!" panted Gilmore, twisting the derringer from her grip.

With her clenched fist she struck him square on the mouth. If she had hoped to knock him down, the hope failed. Gilmore did not even flinch. He yanked her forward, seized her by the belt, and pulled her across the table, to a brave accompaniment of crashing china as the table tilted.

When he had her flat on the table, face down, he held her there, using for the purpose no more strength than was absolutely necessary. Hers was a most undignified position, and she knew it. She wriggled and kicked and struggled. She yelled continuously for help. Oh, she was in a most wonderful rage!

Gilmore looked over his shoulder at the kitchen doorway. The kitchen was dark. It appeared to be deserted. He hoped it was.

Forcing the girl's hands behind her back, he pinioned her wrists one-handed. Then he reached up to the home-made hanger above the center of the table, and took down the lamp. When he had blown it

out, he carefully set it back, and stooped to speak to Miss Stuart. She was making so much noise herself that he was forced almost to bellow in her ear before she would grant him any attention. When she lay half-sobbing, halfpanting, but otherwise silent, he spoke calmly.

"I don't want to hog-tie yuh, ma'am I sure don't; but unless yuh give me yore word not to leave this room for half an hour after I've gone, why, I'll have to. Just yore word is all I want."

"I won't! I won't! I'll I'll see you killed for this! I will! I will, if it takes a hundred years!"

"Yuh wouldn't care none about livin' so long, ma'am, an' I dunno as I would, either. But help yoreself. The bridle's off the hoss to you. Won't yuh look nice when the family comes home an' finds yuh hog-tied all same yearlin'? It'll be kind of a joke on you, won't it?"

This aspect of the matter had not struck her till he mentioned it. It carried no appeal.

"Yo're thinkin' Sing Fah'll find yuh, ain't yuh?" he continued. "Maybe he will, but it's a heap doubtful. Anyway, when the family sifts in, yuh can tell 'em how yuh held me up for half an hour, till I could move a chair close enough with my left foot to nudge yuh on the arm an' upset yore equilibrium, like I heard a juggler fellah say once down in Santone. Yuh can tell 'em that. It'll make 'em laugh, maybe. Yuh got to give the reason for bein' tied up yuh know that. On the other hand, ma'am, yore word is plenty good with me. What do yuh say?"

She said nothing. Instead, she exerted all her strength to free herself. Her toes beat a frenzied tattoo on the table. She whacked her head against it, and bumped her nose till the pain made her weep. Now, and not till now, did his grasp relax the merest trifle.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he apologized; "but yuh see it's no manner of use. Yuh'll hurt yoreself if yuh keep a whangin' yore head sideways thataway. Be reasonable, can't yuh?"

Nothing in the world so incenses a woman as the request to "be reasonable." Miss Stuart, already in a fine rage, now furnished a most ecstatic display of fury.

Gilmore laughed aloud at her struggles which did not tend to soothe the girl. In her rage she contrived to twist her head to one side, and for one instant to jerk her wrists upward. His left sleeve brushed her cheek. Her chin shot forward, and she clamped her jaws in a bulldog grip on the flesh of his forearm.

The pain was exquisite, but Gilmore did not flinch. Slowly, gently, he forced a rigid thumb and forefinger into her cheeks. This method is sometimes found efficacious in biting a horse which sets its teeth. It worked with Miss Stuart. She held on as long as she could, but no human being could resist the pressure of those inexorable fingers. Her jaws separated reluctantly, and Gilmore moved his arm out of tooth-reach.

The girl's body relaxed, and she began to cry stormily. Gilmore felt like turning her over on his knees and giving her a thorough spanking. The little vixen!

"Honest, ma'am," he observed whimsically, "yuh've shore got the worst manners I ever seen. Yuh hadn't ought to bite folks. Yuh'd ought to know better, a big girl like you. It all comes from wearin' pants, I'll bet. Yore parents have shore neglected yore education. Likely I'll get the spinal maginnis, or somethin'. About that promise do yuh gimme yore word to set still an' be a good child till I'm a half-hour on my way, or do I hog-tie yuh an' stuff a towel down yore neck? I'd have to gag yuh," he added.

Save a gusty sob, she made no sound. He wished that she would make up her mind. Waiting was fraught with assorted dangers. In spite of his assertion to the contrary, he knew perfectly well that Sing Fah might come in from the kitchen; then, too, "dad" and the boys were due at any moment.

"Don't hurry any about decidin'," hazarded the patient Gilmore. "I've got all night, of course."

To his astonishment, for he had expected her to essay one more struggle, she replied in a low voice, her tone under perfect control:

"I give you my word."

"Yuh'll gimme a half-hour's start? Do yuh understand?"

"Certainly. I don't quibble. When I give my word, I give it."

"Excuse me, ma'am, of course. I under--"

"If you will release me," she remarked icily, "I shall be greatly indebted to you,"

"Shore, shore! I'd clean forgot I was holdin' yuh."

He tried to help her to her feet, but she struck down his hands and swung to the floor unaided.

His eyes had grown somewhat accustomed to the darkness by now. He could dimly see the girl where she stood at the end of the table, her clenched fists resting on the wood. Stooping, he felt about on the floor for his hat, found it, and straightened quickly. He turned to go, but wheeled back as Miss Stuart spoke.

"I've given you my word," she said in hard, level tones. "For thirty

minutes you're free as a bird. After that, Mr. Man, keep your gun loose! You'll pay for what you've done to-night. Why, you poor fool you, coming up here to Glenn County expecting to run things! You--you deputy sheriff! You won't live a week!"

"That's what they told me down south," he observed tranquilly. "But I've learned one thing, ma'am, in my travels round this vale of tears, an' that's never to believe all yuh hear. I expect I'll be a heap alive at the end o' the week. Don't make any mistake about that! I'll be seein' yuh again, too. Don't forget that!"

"Go, will you?" Her outflung arm pointed to the door.

"Yes," he continued, unheeding, "I'll be seein' yuh again. Yuh an' me are goin' to be friends good friends. I like you, an' yo're a goin' to like me not a little bit, but a whole lot. Before we get through, yo're a goin' to like me feetter'n anybody yuh ever come across. That's the way I like yuh now. Instanter, when I saw yore eyes an' hair, I knowed. Couldn't help myself. It come that quick. Curious, ain't it?"

"Very," she agreed calmly. "It adds a trifle to the score."

"I s'pose it does, but it don't matter any. Yo're a goin' to forget all about scores you'll see!"

So, blithely, he made his way through the darkness of the house to the outer air. Once beyond the door, however, his careless demeanor vanished. He scooped up bridle and saddle and ran toward the corral as swiftly as his high heels would allow. Opening the gate, he slipped in with his bridle and cast about for the dun.

Despite the bright starlight, picking out the dun in that crowded corral was no easy matter. The yellow horse saw his master first, and he knew well enough what was wanted of him. Work and plenty of it, on

top of what he had done that day, was not a pleasant prospect. He shouldered in between two mares, and the three fled round the corral together.

That action was the dun's undoing. Gilmore placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled piercingly. The dun stiffened his legs and slid to a halt. His master approached and bridled him quickly.

"Yuh old son of a dog-robber!" he said affectionately, leading the horse out. "All serene now, ain't yuh? Couldn't make yuh run away for shucks, huh? Yuh good-for-nothin' hollow accordeen, ropes don't mean a whole lot to yuh, do they now? But a whistle yuh don't ever forget what that means, do yuh?"

The dun saddled, Gilmore knelt and put his ear to the ground. He heard nothing, and mounted quickly. Spurring his horse, he dashed past the house, heading southeast, in which direction lay Virgin City. This town was not his ultimate destination, for Plain Edge, the county seat, was where the sheriff lived.

"But," he reasoned, "they know I'm a deputy, or they will know when she tells 'em. I can't make it ahead of 'em till the hoss is rested good. They'll know my first job is to see the sheriff. Knowin' this, they'll think my driftin' toward Virgin City is a blind, an' instead o' sailin' after, they'll drag it up Plain Edge way, expectin' I'll swing no'th an' make it easy for 'em. I guess, though, I'd better send for Jimmy. This deal don't look, first off, like a one-man job. What's yore idea, Frosty fellah?"

"Frosty fellah" flattened his left ear and continued to lope steadily. A half-hour later Gilmore slowed the little horse to a walk, and he kept at this gait all night.

He would have hugely enjoyed making a run of it to Plain Edge. Had

Frosty been fresh, he would have risked it, for he doubted whether there was anywhere within five hundred miles another horse the equal of the dun in bottom and speed. But when there is a long trail to be covered, no weary pony, however excellent, can compete with fresh animals. Gilmore consoled himself with the thought that in Virgin City he might pick up much useful information regarding the cattle war. In any case, the place was two days' travel nearer the desired Jimmy than was Plain Edge.

"Four by stage two three on the train," mused the young man, checking off the days on his fingers. "It ought to get there in a week. In two weeks he'd ought to be here. Here, you Frosty hoss, stop yore daisy-cuttin'! Yo're tired, but yo're not so all in as that."

When the sun began to lift above the rim of the world, Gilmore stopped on the crest of a ridge and looked over the way he had come. Swell, ridge, and draw; draw, ridge, and swell the earth's surface was visible for miles and miles in the clear air of the high country; but, save cattle here and there, Gilmore saw no living thing.

"Razzle-dazzled 'em!" he observed joyfully, and urged Frosty onward.

CHAPTER IV

ONE broad, wavering street fenced by eight saloons, two stores, a hotel, three dance-halls, an express-office, a stage station, and some fifty dwellings that was Virgin City. Surrounded by a picket-line of empty tin cans, the town lay blistering under the summer sun when Gilmore's tired pony dispiritedly shuffled in between two false fronts and stopped in front of the hotel corral.

Under the wooden awning of Sam Kyle's Ace Saloon, the building across the street, three citizens sat in tip-tilted chairs and watched

Gilmore closely. A young woman stood in the saloon doorway. Her hands were on her hips, her eyes were fixed on the stranger. Black-eyed, blackhaired, lithe-bodied, she was strikingly handsome in a bold way.

She was the proprietor's wife, and newcomers always interested her. They might spend money freely, they might be interesting to talk to, or they might endeavor to run the town. In any event, a newcomer signified a certain degree of excitement. She wondered which degree this particular stranger would furnish.

The three citizens sitting under the awning were also wondering. They wondered what his politics were, and whether he had come to town to make trouble. They noted that he wore but one six-shooter, and decided that he was not a professional gunman. Still...

They shifted their quids and pondered. The three were Triangle O punchers, and as such it was incumbent upon them to be wary; for Virgin City was frequently visited by the riders of the Hash Knife 'and the V Up-and-Down.

"Diamon' A brand," muttered one of the punchers.

"Uhuh!" agreed the second.

"Noo Mexico," vouchsafed the third. "Over near the Rio Grande. Seen it often when I was workin' for the Seven Lazy Seven."

They relapsed into sleepy silence; yet had any person made a hostile move in their direction, they could have gone into instantaneous action.

Gilmore, whistling the joyous tune of "Bonny Dundee," unsaddled his horse, turned it into the corral, and entered the hotel, carrying his saddle. He had seen the three under the saloon awning, and was

fully aware that they had noted every salient point about himself and his horse. Beyond a swift glance, he paid no attention to the good-looking girl who stood in the saloon doorway.

He dumped saddle and bridle in a corner of the barroom and walked to the bar. Two men, conversing in low tones at the end of the bar, ceased talking at his entrance, turned, and stared as unobtrusively as possible.

"Whisky," he said shortly.

"Cert!" replied the bartender, and slammed a bottle and glass on the bar.

"Water," remarked Gilmore, pouring out a meagre finger of the Old Jordan.

The bartender opened his mouth to speak; but he found it impossible to utter what was on his tongue's tip, for Gilmore's bright blue eyes were fixed on his, and the stranger's smile was peculiarly unpleasant.

"Water, I said," drawled Gilmore. "Are yuh workin' behind that bar, or are yuh givin' imitations of a ossified mummy?"

The two men at the end of the bar exchanged meaning glances. The bartender gulped, gasped, coughed once, and somehow poured a glass of water. His expression was malevolent as he swept Gilmore's two bits into the cash-drawer.

Gilmore looked about him. On a side wall hung a gaudy calendar, setting forth, besides the dates, the alleged fact that some one's bakingpowder was the only baking-powder in the world. Gilmore walked across to the calendar, tore off the day's sheet, and returned to the bar. Spreading the sheet face down beside his glass, he

unearthed a stubby pencil from the recesses of an inner vest-pocket, and proceeded to write his letter to Jimmy. When he had signed his name, he looked across at the bartender.

"Got an envelope?"

"Naw," was the surly response.

"Think again, fellah," came the swift advice. "Scratch yore head, if yuh got" to, and think again."

"Ain't got no envelopes."

"One'll do."

The bartender whirled toward Gilmore. He had conjured up a working head of courage. Perhaps the stranger was not to be feared, after all.

"I done told you" he began viciously, and choked.

By an extremely simple twist of his right wrist, Gilmore had flicked the full glass of whisky and water into the bartender's eyes. The man yelped and hopped up and down with pain and rage.

"Lucky there's water mixed up with that varnish, or yuh'd shore be blinded," soothed Gilmore. "I wouldn't go for to wipe out my eyes with that salt-sack. Try yore shirt."

The insulted and blinded bartender, smarting and blowing, found the water-bucket and relief.

"About that envelope," Gilmore observed calmly, when the victim was partly himself again.

Meekly, the thoroughly chastened bartender fished an envelope from the cash-drawer and slid it across the bar. Gilmore tossed him a dime, folded and sealed the letter, and departed in search of the stage station.

His letter in care of the station-agent, he strolled the length of Main Street, and did not return to the hotel till the clatter of a beaten dishpan announced the serving of the midday meal.

Dinner over, Gilmore entered the barroom, sat down in the corner near his saddle, and rolled a cigarette. To the bartender and the customers he paid no attention, for his thoughts were centered on more interesting subjects. Amber eyes and honey-colored hair can make a pleasant mental picture.

"What a good-looking chin she had, too!" he mused. "An' cheeks, an' mouth, an' ears, an' all. I wonder how she'd look in skirts!"

He began to whistle "Lochaber No More," with variations. The bar being fairly well lined at the time, it was inevitable that one of the fringe should project himself into the lime-light. The projector, a long, black-avised individual, had not witnessed Gilmore's dousing of the bartender, but he had heard of it.

"Listen to the mocking-bird!" suggested this thirster after publicity. "Ain't it sweet?"

Conversation at the bar promptly languished. Men found the immediate vicinity of the long citizen distasteful, and began to edge away. Before three minutes had passed, there was discovered a clear space on his either hand.

This was a trifle disconcerting. The loss of the shoulder-touch always is; but he had gone too far. To continue was imperative.

Ostentatiously he turned his back on the whistling Gilmore and poured out another drink.

"It shore beats all," remarked the long citizen to the bartender, who remained at the discreet distance of two yards, "how them singin' birds'll come driftin' in an' blow their liT old tin horns!"

Gilmore, who had not ceased to whistle unslurringly, dropped his tobacco-bag. He leaned sidewise in his chair; but instead of picking up the bag, his fingers closed on the rifle leaning across his saddle. His legs concealed the change of objective. The long mail was raising a glass of whisky to his lips. Gilmore hunched a shoulder. The rifle spat flame and smoke with a roar.

The tall citizen's hand halted six inches from his mouth. Stupidly he stared, first at his empty fingers, then down at the bits of broken glass lying in a trickle of liquor on the bar-top.

Gilmore laid down his rifle and readjusted himself in his chair. Not knowing his audience, he kept his right hand reasonably near the butt of his six-shooter.

"My mistake, stranger," he drawled apologetically, grinning up at the man who had mentioned mocking-birds. "I'm awful careless with a rifle. Sometimes it will go off thataway three or four times a day; then again I won't have any trouble for a week, maybe. I'm shore a nervous party awful nervous. Can't get over it. Yuh'll have to excuse me, mister. Have another drink to make up for the one I spoiled for yuh. Barkeep, fill the gent's hand!"

But the long man's thirst was assuaged. Pale to the ears, he faded from the barroom. Seven citizens of Virgin City drifted streetward in his wake.

"From the floor, leanin' over, at the full stretch of his arm--that's shootin'!" was the awed comment of one of the seven, when they were out of ear-shot; and the others agreed with him.

Left to himself, Gilmore winked at the glum bartender and started in on the "Logic of Buchan."

"Idjit!" he reproved himself, between trills. "Why couldn't ye take a little sass once in a while? Had to spring a grand-stand play, too. Yo're not much of a deputy!"

In the afternoon Gilmore strolled across to Sam Kyle's saloon. The proprietor's wife saw him coming.

"You look tired, Tom," Mrs. Kyle observed artlessly, passing behind the bar. "S'pose you go and fill the empties out o' the half-barrel? I'll take your place for a while."

Nothing loath for filling bottles meant a long nap the bartender departed. When Gilmore entered the saloon, the proprietor's wife was swabbing the bar. The bar did not require swabbing, but the exercise displayed a pretty arm to excellent advantage.

Gilmore was not unappreciative. He gazed at the arm and into the remarkably fine eyes of the lady. Then he smiled gently and said that he thought he'd have a little whisky and water. She placed the two liquids before him gravely. He poured, mixed, and drank just as gravely.

The storekeeper entered in search of refreshment. Mrs. Kyle expertly alined the usual ingredients convenient to his right hand, after which she returned to her post near the silent and reflective Gilmore. Her actions were not lost on the storekeeper. He drank and pussy-footed hastily back to his store.

"She's got a new one," he observed to a Triangle O customer. "If I was Sam Kyle, I'd--"

"You'd let her do what she damwell pleases, like she does now," returned the cowboy, with a grin. "Not forty-fours, Bill--forty-five my gun is."

"Shore, shore! I must be gettin' careless in my old age not to remember that. Here y'are. Sam ain't really a fool yuh can't run a saloon an' be one exactly; an' yet Sam Kyle don't seem to look after his wife none whatsoever."

"I'm tellin' yuh she don't mean no harm," emphasized the puncher. "She's straight."

"All the same, Sam'll just naturally up an' fill his missus full o' lead some o' these dewy mornin's. He's deep, Sam is, and them deep ones won't stand everythin'."

"S'pose yuh hop over an' tell him 'bout the serpent in his midst," the puncher suggested hopefully. "I'll hold yore hat an' order yore coffin."

The storekeeper smiled wanly and changed the subject.

Gilmore, dawdling over his drink, was in no hurry to speak. Three customers came and went before he shifted his shoulders to face the woman.

"Any of the Lazy D outfit in town?" he inquired.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe. They ain't been in here, anyhow."

"Do they always come in here?"

"Most generally. They come oftener now than they used to. When the

old man was alive, I can tell you, stranger, old John Drummond used to keep his boys a humpin'. They earned their pay, take it from me; but now, since Tom Johnson came to be manager, they've been able to act like human beings. It must be three years since old John Drummond passed out. He was a hard worker, like I said, but he was one square gent, if ever there was one. He'd 'a' stopped this here fuss, and stopped it quick, I'm telling you. There never was any nonsense about him."

"Why don't somebody else stop it?" Gilmore's tone was casual.

"In the first place, there's nobody round here big enough to stop it. In the second place" she lowered her voice and leaned nearer to him "nobody wants to stop it. A cattle war is a gamble somebody wins, and wins big. The winnings are sure worth a battle."

"Shore, ma'am, shore," agreed Gilmore, making rings on the bar with the wet bottom of his glass. "I wonder is the Lazy D the same outfit she was before John Drummond went out!"

"How do you mean the same?"

"Same men like that."

"Only Tom Johnson him that was foreman. He's manager now, and the only one left of the old outfit. They all quit after the old man went, and Tom, he filled his band with some hard gents; but then a punch has got to be hard to hold down a job in Glenn County. It's eat or be et. What beats me is why old John's son don't come up here and look after his property. Not that Tom Johnson ain't looking after it all right I don't mean that, not for a minute; but you'd think a sport owning a ranch like the Lazy D would pay it a visit once in a while. But not him. Young John roosts somewhere in Texas, and don't pay any more attention to the ranch than if it was nothing. I'll bet he cashes the

checks Tom sends him, though!"

Gilmore, a trifle astonished at the woman's garrulity, rolled a cigarette one-handed and with his thumb-nail snapped a match alight. Over the pulsing flame his bright blue eyes stared into the woman's face. He did not realize that her loquacity was prompted solely by an overpowering desire to talk with a person other than an inhabitant or frequenter of Virgin City.

"Hasn't the young fellah ever been here?" he questioned idly.

"No," she said, shaking her head. "He's always stayed home in Texas on old John's other ranch."

"Two ranches, eh? The Drummond family must be well fixed."

"I guess so, and then some. Say, mister, what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't say, but it's Gilmore Dal Gilmore."

"Mine's Maryjane Kyle Missus Maryjane Kyle. I'm married. My husband, Sam, he runs this shack."

Gilmore received the information with some surprise, for Maryjane Kyle did not have a domestic look. He wondered what sort of man Sam might be.

"Thinking of staying here any time?" pursued Mrs. Maryjane, her head slightly tilted.

"I might."

"I'm sure I hope you do. I'

Bang! A shot crashed in the street. A man reeled through the doorway of the saloon, fell flat on his face, rolled over, and sat up. Supporting himself on one hand, he strove to drag out his gun; but before the weapon was clear of the holster, a hard-featured person in chaps appeared in the doorway and shot him through the heart.

The man on the floor fell back. His head struck the floor a bumping thud, moved feebly, and was still.

"Sam! Sam!" screamed Mrs. Kyle.

She ran round the bar and fell on her knees beside the body. Dal Gilmore hitched up his belt, circled the weeping woman and her dead, and slid through the doorway. Thirty yards away the hard-featured citizen was preparing to mount his horse.

"Hands up!" called Mr. Gilmore, six-shooter drawn.

The murderer paused, one foot in the stirrup. Quite hastily his elbows nudged his ears. Slowly his foot fell away from the stirrup; slowly he turned, faced Mr. Gilmore, and swore quite heartily.

"Say!" he bawled. "What for a deal is this? What are yuh try in' to do?"

"I wish yuh wouldn't shout so," Mr. Gilmore complained fretfully, walking toward him. "I ain't hard of hearin'; an' besides, I don't like loud talk. I ain't tryin' to do anything, fellah, but arrest yuh for murder!"

"Murder! Say, what--"

"Yuh hadn't ought to 'a' drilled him in the back," interrupted Gilmore severely. "Somehow, I didn't like the look of that a little bit. It's a greaser trick, that is, an' yuh don't look like a Mexican. Are yuh?"

The hard-featured citizen gasped. When he could speak, he swore anew.

"What call have yuh to arrest me?" he shouted at the tail of a string of crackling oaths. "I tell yuh, stranger, yuh just better think again before hornin' in on this deal! Maybe yuh don't know where yuh are?"

"Shore I'm right here, takin' yore gun away for yuh, an' with my gun right against yore shirt. I know it's reckoned dangerous to work in so close, but I ain't worryin' any. This here gun of mine pulls awful easy. A fellah don't hardly know he's touched the trigger when off she goes, kerblam! an' there yuh are all spread out on the real estate. Now yuh can turn round, still keepin' yore hands over yore head, an' walk across the street to the hotel."

"I won't!" announced the other firmly.

"No? I'm sorry. I'd enjoy havin' yuh go alive, but if yuh prefer goin' feet first, why, fellah, just take a rest while I'm countin' three. One two that's right. I kind of thought yuh'd see the light!"

Gilmore marched his prisoner into the hotel, produced shiny new handcuffs from the cantinas on his saddle, and snapped them on the murderer's wrists. The prisoner had lapsed into stupefied silence.

Gilmore called the landlord and paid his bill. He was stowing away the change when a stocky man with green and shifty eyes entered quietly.

"I'm the marshal," announced the shifty-eyed man, superfluously indicating with a spatulate thumb the star pinned against the upper lefthand pocket of his vest. "Me bein' the duly constitooted officer of the law as made and provided here in Virgin City, I'd shore admire to know wherein an' how yuh undertake to mix in on a fair fight an' arrest

the survivin' party!"

Gilmore turned a genial gaze on the marshal. When he spoke, his tones were almost honeyed in their suave accents.

"The marshal? Yuh don't say! Well, now, I'm glad to hear it. Shore yuh want to know all about the fraycas, an' correct, too. Yuh know yore business I can see that by the way yuh keep yore pretty little star all bright an' shinin'. Yuh'd like to know where I get the right to arrest this killer. I'm a deputy sheriff. Here take a good look at my star. I always wear it under my vest thisaway, because it ain't really nobody's business who I am till it comes time for a showdown, like now. Have I any right to arrest this man?"

"Shore," agreed the marshal, scratching his head; "but I can tell yuh yo're makin' a big mistake!"

"No mistake at all," Gilmore contradicted warmly. "I saw the whole fraycas. This party wearin' the come-alongs didn't give the other sport a chance. It was a cold deal. He'll hang for murder!"

"Maybe he did, but--"

"Did I hear yuh say 'maybe'?"

Gilmore's bright blue eyes turned frosty on the instant, as they gimleted their way into the shifty green orbs of the marshal.

"Yuh did not," the marshal asserted hastily. "It's just like yuh say, but still it's a mistake. The beefed gent was Sam Kyle, owner of the Ace Saloon. This party is Slim Dennison, foreman o' the V Up-an'-Down outfit. There ain't no chance he'll hang not in Glenn County, nohow. Yuh might just as well turn him loose, Mr. Deputy, an' save hard feelin's an' a lot o' trouble all round."

"If yuh don't," sneered the hard-faced Dennison, "yuh'll be lynched so quick it'll make yore hair curl!"

"If I am, yuh'll be too dead to enjoy the sight," retorted Gilmore. "Yo're goin' to Plain Edge with me. Yuh can go livin', like I say, or yuh can go in a pack, but yo're goin'. It's a whipsaw yuh lose both ways. Marshal, yo're an officer of the law. I call on you to help me in this deal. You bring the prisoner along, while I carry my saddle an' bridle down to the corral. That's it in front of me, both of yuh!"

In deep silence, watched by amazed citizens who carefully refrained from comments or any display of interest, the three walked to the corral. The storekeeper, standing in his doorway, rubbed a stubbly chin.

"Who'd 'a' thought that could happen in Glenn County?" he muttered. "Law an' order l--It don't sound possible!"

CHAPTER V

THE marshal rode with the deputy and his prisoner on their way north. He had no burning desire to keep them company; but Dal Gilmore had suggested it suggested it with twinkling eyes and a fixed grin that would have daunted stronger men than the marshal.

"It's right kindly o' yuh to trapes along with us thisaway," acknowledged Gilmore, when the town was a mile astern of their horses' tails. "I won't forget it."

The prisoner laughed harshly. Like the scratch of a slipped knife angling across a plate, the sound grated on the marshal's stretched nerves, and he almost jumped. He raised his eyes to find Gilmore staring at him, an odd quirk at each corner of the young man's smiling mouth. The marshal realized that he might as well have

jumped. To cover his confusion, he spoke more or less at random.

"Yo're makin' a big mistake," he said again.

"Yuh said that before," Gilmore complained plaintively. "I could find it easy to like yuh a lot, marshal, if yuh wasn't always repeatin' yoreself. Travelin' the same trail thataway don't yuh ever get tired of it?"

The marshal did not reply. He did not know how. The verbal parry being out of the question, the obvious course was to make a remark beyond which there would lie nothing save an appeal to arms. To make such a remark would have exceedingly rejoiced his soul; but somehow it is difficult to free one's mind to a quick-shooting citizen who is heedless of consequences.

The marshal had been a witness to Gilmore's rifle-practice in the hotel bar. He possessed a certain brand of animal courage. Willingly he would have gone up against his equals, any or all of them; but he knew in his inmost heart that he was Gilmore's physical, mental, and moral inferior, and he knew that Gilmore knew it. The marshal only hoped that the prisoner did not know it, too.

"Yo're a fine marshal, Tim Simms!" Slim Dennison announced suddenly. "Yuh let this sport take me away right out from under yore nose. What'll Jack Shaw do about it, huh? I'm askin' yuh, what'll Jack do?"

The marshal's green eyes shifted hither and yon quite rapidly. Gilmore chuckled, and rolled a cigarette.

"Why don't yuh answer the gent?" was Gilmore's polite query, when the harassed marshal remained dumb.

Tim Simms snorted out a reference to the infernal regions.

"Seems like it might be just that, before all's over," drawled Gilmore. "There's a heap o' hell lyin' round loose an' promiscuous in Glenn County too much by a whole lot. It ought to be cleaned up. It's goin' to be cleaned up. If yuh set any value by that star on yore chest, yuh'll help."

"Say -" began the marshal.

"Don't be in too big a hurry to say it," advised Gilmore.

The marshal subsided. The prisoner emitted a string of oaths.

"Have yuh done gone traded in yore gun for a atomizer, Tim Simms?" he added. "What's the matter with yuh, anyway?"

"You can go plumb to hell!" snapped the marshal, wagging a thick forefinger at Slim. "Don'tcha try to ride me, feller don'tcha try it!"

"If I had my gun I'd ride yuh quick enough, an' don'tcha forget it! Yuh know I ain't got it. That's why yuh can talk thisaway!"

There was reason in this. Furthermore, by quarreling with Slim, there was nothing to gain and a great deal to lose.

"If yuh had yore gun, yuh wouldn't be here," said the marshal equably. "Don't yuh fret none. Yuh'll get out o' this all right."

"I know that, but you'd ought to 'a' done somethin', 'stead of standin' there like a wart on a pickle. Yuh don't think I like this, do yuh?"

Slim suggestively jingled his handcuffs. The marshal stared unhappily at his horse's ears. He and the prisoner were riding side by side. Gilmore had dropped a yard or two in the rear. Now he called a halt and ordered the prisoner to change horses with him.

"Yo're heavier'n me," he explained, "an' the dun's stronger'n yore cayuse. If he piles yuh, we'll be shore to stop an' pick yuh up."

But the yellow horse did not pile Slim Dennison. He bore him meekly enough, and Gilmore took up his former position in the rear.

Little by little, Gilmore dropped back till several yards separated him from the others. Reaching down, he made sure that his six-shooter was loose in the holster. Then he began to loll in the saddle and hum broken snatches of song. At intervals he yawned widely and loudly.

All these bits of byplay were not lost on the precious pair in front. Under cover of the marshal's lighting a cigarette for Slim, they whispered together.

"They're plottin' away forty to the minute!" Gilmore said to himself delightedly. "This is goin' to be easier than I thought."

Rounding a low hill, the trail diagonally climbed a ridge, ribboned down the reverse slope, and vanished in a belt of pine-trees. At the top of the ridge Gilmore caught the marshal looking furtively over his shoulder. He promptly wavered a little in the saddle. His head bobbed. He strove to present the appearance of one far gone in fatigue and drowsiness.

It was coarse work, but the marshal was no judge of acting. Wholly devoid of subtlety himself, he did not attribute that admirable quality to others.

Where the shadow of the first pine-tree fell across the trail, Simms slipped from his saddle. At the same moment Slim Dennison, crouching forward, jumped the dun horse in among the trees. Simultaneously with the aforesaid actions of the marshal and the prisoner, Gilmore's hand flashed down and up, and his six-shooter

spat spitefully.

The marshal howled shrilly as his revolver flew one way and the last joint of his thumb another. From the belt of pines there drifted the sound of galloping hoofs. Gilmore hurriedly clapped two fingers to his mouth, and the galloping sound ceased abruptly.

Gilmore approached the agonized Simms, who was teetering upon his high heels and clutching the wrist of his wounded hand as if he feared it would depart from him. When the deputy had recovered the marshal's six-shooter and stuffed it into the waistband of his own trousers, he pulled out another pair of handcuffs and chained the unhappy individual fast to a lodge-pole pine.

"Wait for me," Gilmore urged genially, and went into the woods on the trail of Slim Dennison and the dun.

Fifty yards from where he had left the marshal he found the dun horse, its legs braced foursquare, peacefully gazing upon the writhing form of Slim Dennison. Slim was indisposed after his heavy fall, and showed it noisily. Gilmore frankly hooted and slapped his leather-clad thighs.

"What do yuh think of my little trick hoss?" he demanded. "Piled yuh nice an' easy, didn't he? Yessir, that's a reg'lar four-legged hoss with a mane an' a tail, that is! I wouldn't take a hundred dollars for him no, not if I was flat broke an' my ribs caved in. Don't mind me, Slim! Go on, have yore sick out. Yuh got all the time there is. After yuh get through, we'll go back an' join the marshal where he's got both arms wrapped round a tree. Funny fellah, that marshal man! I never did see any gent get attached to anythin' so quick an' so hard!"

Mr. Gilmore laughed anew and wiped tears of unfeigned merriment from his eyes. Then he sat down, leaned comfortably against a tree,

and rolled a cigarette.

After an appreciable interval Slim Dennison hauled himself to a sitting position. He was not pretty to look at. Gilmore stared at him critically.

"As a ranch foreman, yo're almost ruined," observed the deputy, delicately flicking the ash from his cigarette with his little finger. "Yore nose an' yore forehead ain't what they used to be by several square inches of skin, an' yore left ear has been kind of mashed an' shredded up right smart. That chin of yores won't need shavin' for a long, long time, an' yore right eye is turnin' black fast. Yessir, Slim, yore boss won't know yuh when he sees yuh lookin' out through the bars of Plain Edge calaboose!"

Slim Dennison spat several curses and one tooth at his grinning tormentor.

"I forgot yore teeth," Gilmore continued tranquilly. "Any more besides that one? Come on now; up yuh come, an' we'll be gettin' back to the marshal. I don't want him to grow into that tree!"

They returned to the marshal, who, when they appeared, loudly desired to know whether Gilmore wished him to bleed to death.

"There's no arteries in yore thumb not a one," rejoined the deputy. "Yo're just losin' a little surface blood; that's all. Nothin' to worry yuh at all. Here, don't joggle so! How can I wrap her up good wiith you hoppin' round like a stung steer?"

Ten minutes later they were riding northward again, Slim Dennison in the lead on the dun, the marshal following, and the rear brought up by Dal Gilmore. Round Dennison's neck was the loop of a rope, which in turn encircled the neck of the marshal and was finally made fast at

the deputy's saddle-horn.

"You fellahs want to ride nice an' easy like," Gilmore cheerfully remarked. "If those hosses should run away now--"

The prisoners, their backs turned, were unable to perceive the eloquent wave of the deputy's cigarette that completed the sentence, but they knew what was meant, and their jaundiced minds were filled with evil foreboding.

Toward sundown, looking backward across a sun-baked flat, Gilmore saw a lone horseman overhauling them at a stretching run. Herding his prisoners close together, the deputy swung his horse across the trail in front of them, and dismounted. He had no sentimental notions about the sanctity of prisoners' bodies. If a rescue were toward, then so much the worse for them. They would be shot first.

Not knowing how Slim Dennison's horse would act under fire, he was careful not to rest his rifle on the saddle when he squinted through the sights at the oncoming rider.

"Yore finish is a-comin'," announced Slim Dennison gleefully, his beady black eyes alight. "This sport is just the lead-horse; the rest o' the herd will be up shortly. Then I guess maybe yuh'll be singin' another tune!"

"Yuh'll be lynched," balefully observed the marshal. "Lynched, I tell yuh! That's just what's a-goin' to happen to yuh. Teach yuh to come up here an' try to run things!"

"I guess likely," returned Gilmore. "Hot day, ain't it?"

There was no further interchange of courtesies.

At four hundred yards' range Gilmore fired a warning shot high. The horseman immediately halted and flung up his right hand, palm outward, in the peace sign.

"Now I wonder!" muttered Gilmore, and continued to stare warily along the sights of his Winchester.

The rider dismounted, flung the reins over his mount's head, stepped far to one side, and unbuckled his cartridge-belt. Raising it above his head, so that Gilmore could plainly see the sixshooter in its holster and the knife in its sheath, he quickly lowered belt and weapons to the ground and started to walk toward Gilmore, with both hands on a level with his ears. The deputy did not cease to cover him as he approached.

"I'd kind of stop right there," softly advised Gilmore, when the newcomer was within twenty yards. "I can hear what yuh have to say all right!"

The man instantly came to a halt. He was a wide-shouldered, swarthy individual with a black mustache and piercing black eyes.

"I have nothin' to say," he remarked with a flash of white teeth. "I have letter. Can I geeve her you?"

"Just drop her on the ground, then turn yore back, walk five steps, an' sit down."

"Shore, I do dat."

The dark man fished in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, and produced a crumbled bit of paper. He tossed it toward Gilmore, turned his back, and did as the deputy had ordered.

Gilmore unhurriedly walked forward and picked up the paper. He

retreated behind his breastworks before smoothing out its several folds. The letter ran;

DEAR MR. GILMORE :

You are in great danger. Slim Dennison's friends, and the marshal's, too, are organizing to trail you and that murderer. They aim to kill you and free the murderer. They will start soon. Don't stay on the trail. Smoky Nivette will show you how to get to Plain Edge by a short cut. He is an honest man and a friend of mine. You can trust him.

Hoping this finds you well, as it leaves me, but very sad at present, I am

Your heart-broken friend,

MARYJANE KYLE.

Gilmore stuffed the letter into one of his vestpockets and hurriedly dodged round his breastworks to shake the hand of Smoky Nivette. He had made an instantaneous decision to accept the warning at its face value. It might be a forgery, designed to lead him into a trap; but if his enemies were plotting his downfall, why should they go to the trouble of writing a letter and sending a messenger when a simple, unfrilled pursuit would have been easier and more logical? So the deputy reasoned as he shook hands with Nivette and assured him that he was very glad to see him.

"Me, too," flashed Smoky Nivette, with a chuckle of mirth directly inherited from his French father. "We got to hurry. I geet my hoss un we weel dreeft."

"Y'betcha!" said Gilmore, and returned to his prisoners.

They regarded him glumly. Of the two, the marshal appeared to be a

degree the more unhappy.

"That dam' breed!" the marshal remarked in a low voice. "What does he want?"

"Seems like yuh come mighty near knowin', or yuh wouldn't be so free with yore language," Gilmore replied, returning his rifle to the scabbard under the right fender.

"It won't do yuh no good," snarled the marshal. "We'll be free ten minutes after we see the sheriff in Plain Edge."

"I guess," said Gilmore. "I guess likely!"

Smoky Nivette, riding up, bestowed upon the prisoners the steady, glittering stare of his Indian ancestry on the petticoat side. His features had subtly changed. In the hard, black eyes and in the dark face one read now the call of the stake, the flaying knives, the burning splinters, and other recondite means to the end that captives may be put to unutterable anguish.

Dennison and the marshal returned the halfbreed's gaze, but not for long. Their eyes wavered, shifted, then slid sidewise in their sockets, and finally settled upon the landscape. Gilmore smiled slightly, and suggested that they might as well be continuing their journey.

Under the expert guidance of Smoky Nivette the party turned aside from the trail, dropped down a steep slope, and rode through a fringe of cottonwoods into a creek. Riding in the water, they followed the creek till darkness replaced the long summer twilight; then they went ashore, unsaddled, and hobbled the horses.

The half-breed built a tiny fire between two boulders so cunningly that barely a ray was visible at a distance of forty feet. The prisoners, bootless lest they should be moved to attempt escape cuddled their

feet and hungrily sniffed the frying bacon. Gilmore lay on his back, and knew that the world was good. So far luck had been amazingly with him. He hoped it would remain in that position.

"How far to Plain Edge?" he inquired, when the food had vanished.

"Feefty mile," replied Nivette. "Long mile dey are, too. Lak dis!"

He made a saw-tooth motion with his right hand.

"Perpendicular scenery, huh? We'll get there, if it's worse'n that."

"Why go dere, Meester Geelmore?" questioned the half-breed, his eyes two shining pinpoints in the thin glow of his cigarette.

"What do you mean?" Gilmore's tone held more than a hint of hardness.

"I mean dis why tak' dese men to Plain Edge? Sleem, she have keel Sam Kyle. Sleem mus' die. I have not ask for why Teem, de marshal, wear de han'cuff, but I guess she be good t'ing eef Teem die, too. Well, den, we tak' dem to Plain Edge. Dey weel not die. Dey weel go free. So, I say, why tak' dem to Plain Edge? Dees plass she ees good plass for leave a man. Are you me?"

Gilmore understood. So did the two prisoners, as their accelerated breathing plainly testified.

"Can't be did," Gilmore said shortly. "They goto Plain Edge!"

"But--"

"There ain't any butts. If yuh don't want to guide me to Plain Edge, yuh don't have to. I'll make out on my own hook."

"Oh, I weel go wit you," Nivette grunted resignedly. "I know how you see dees t'ing. I have been deputy, too. You have swore to hold up de law un de ordair. Dat ees right dat ees fine; but mabbeso dere ees no law un no ordair. What ees dere to hold up, den? By gar, dees Glenn County, she ees de bad plass, lak I say widout de law un de ordair, where horse-t'ief un rustler raise trouble all de time. I say we do lak de Texas Rangair treat de greasair let dese two men try for escape; un when we have bury dem, who weel say all was not fair? But eef you say no, den I do what you say. Togedder we tak 'em to Plain Edge!"

"Plain Edge it is," said Gilmore, greatly relieved to hear that the half-breed would not desert him.

Hampered by two prisoners, in an unknown region, and pursued by a band of citizens bent on lynching, he was not in a position where he could afford to refuse a proffer of aid.

CHAPTER VI

IT might well be that the Hash Knife boys, set on the deputy's trail by Louise Stuart, were already in Plain Edge. In that case it would be a large, wide day. As Gilmore had suggested to his two prisoners:

"If yore friends are here, yuh better prayhard!"

The sun was three hours high when the four rode into Plain Edge. The town, a fair counterpart of Virgin City, rubbed its eyes individually and en masse when it beheld the V Up-and-Down foreman and the Virgin City marshal wearing handcuffs.

What could have happened? Had the Virgin City people been struck mad, that they should allow two of their most shining lights to be so treated? Smoky Nivette was known to be an oddly honest man, but

that he should appear in the role of a reformer did not fit the picture. Who was the stranger? Always smiling, wasn't he? Looked like a hard-bitted fellow, though. He must be, to have got the drop on those two sharps. Thus Plain Edge chattered circumspectly under its breath as it followed the four riders to the calaboose.

Smolcy Nivette had informed Gilmore that the sheriff slept in the room behind the jail proper. Leaving the half-breed and the two prisoners in front of the building, the deputy rode round to the back door and beat upon it with his fist. There was no sound within.

Gilmore dismounted, his eyes extremely busy. So far there had been no sign of hostility, and none of the ponies in sight bore the Hash Knife brand. Perhaps he had given Stuart and his boys credit for too much energy. A mild-looking little wisp of a man oozed round the corner.

"Lookin' for the sheriff?" ventured the wispy one.

"Where is he?" Gilmore wheeled, his hand on the latch.

"He ain't," replied the wisp, tilting his hat and scratching a large ear.

"He ain't?" Gilmore repeated stupidly.

"Shore, he ain't," nodded the little man. "Got drunk last night, the sheriff did, an' he mistook a case o' dynamite sticks, down at Clancy's, for the wood-box. Thinkin' they're fire-wood, the sheriff dumps a whole armful of the sticks into the stove. We picked Clancy, who was kind of mixed up with a bed an' most o' the roof, out of the river, but the sheriff done vanished complete. That's why he ain't."

The wispy one extracted a long plug from his boot-leg, bit off a chew, and worked his jaws squirrel-wise.

"That's shore tough!" Gilmore remarked heartily, strong in the knowledge that he was greatly favored of Providence. He had expected trouble with the sheriff, and the official's demise could hardly have been more apropos. "Where's the deputy Enright?" he added.

"Off some'eres," the little man announced. "He may be at Virgin City, or 'most anywheres. Yuh can't tell."

So much the better. Breathing an earnest hope that Enright, who was an unknown quantity, would prolong his absence, Gilmore went to unbar the calaboose door.

The prisoners complained bitterly of hunger and thirst as they were thrust within. True, they had had nothing to eat or drink since the previous day; but neither had their keepers.

"Keep yore hair on," Gilmore advised them. "Yuh'll be watered an' fed quick as I can pack water an' rustle some chuck. Now stop yore yowlin'!"

Slamming shut the iron-bound door of the jail, he dropped the heavy bars across it. He turned to find the wispy one at his elbow.

"My hotel's right across the street," the little man hazarded, with an engaging grin that revealed the loss of several teeth. "Got a good corral, too, an' a Injun to guard it at night."

"That's shore an inducement, that Injun watch-dog," Gilmore replied. "I'll go yuh!"

"Fine!" said the other, and turned to shake hands with Nivette. "She's a long time since I seen you, Smoky."

While he and Nivette were unsaddling the four horses at the corral

bars, Niyette told him that the wispy proprietor could be trusted.

"Dat ees why she say come to hees hotel," explained the half-breed. "She unnerstan' we are buck de hard game, un she wan' for help. She one hones' man, dat Shorty Damman."

Judge Trivvy, the pasty-faced, flabby unadornment of the Glenn County bench, was looking through the bottom of a glass for the fifth time that morning when Gilmore and Nivette entered upon him. He set down the glass and blinked blearily at them.

"Your business, gentlemen?" he said courteously, leaning back in his chair and clasping pudgy hands across a still more pudgy paunch.

"I want a warrant for Slim Dennison," Gilmore announced briskly. "He's charged with the murder of Samuel Kyle, of Virgin City. An' I want another warrant for Timothy Simms, the Virgin City marshal. He's charged with attemptin' to help a prisoner to escape."

His honor's pale, red-rimmed eyes bulged. He found it difficult to credit his ears. Actually, warrants for two of his own friends were being demanded! What was the world coming to? And who was this pushing person wearing the star of a deputy sheriff?

"I don't believe I quite understand," frowned the judge. "I am sure there is some mistake. There must be. I--"

"There ain't any mistake," Gilmore broke in. "I saw Slim Dennison turn the trick. That goes for the marshal, too. I'm a witness against both of 'em. Do I get the warrants?"

"Who are you?" evaded the judge, feeling somehow at a loss in the presence of this direct and forceful character with the smiling mouth and the twinkling blue eyes.

"Who am I?" drawled Gilmore. "Why, I'm just Dal Gilmore, appointed a deputy sheriff in this county by the Governor. Here's my appointment."

From an inner pocket of his vest he pulled a long slip of folded paper. Flipping it open, he spread it on the table in front of the judge. Reluctantly the latter read the formal wording that bore witness to Gilmore's veracity. Trivvy raised his eyes and cocked one plump leg over the other.

"Do you realize what you are doing in requesting me to issue these warrants?" was the judge's bald query.

"I'm doin' what I'm paid to do," Gilmore replied.

"You're young young and, I fear, hotheaded. I realize that your mind is filled with the high duties of your office, but you must learn to temper with common sense the prosecution of those same duties. Nothing is ever gained by thoughtless haste. Think it over. I am sure the V Up-and-Down will be reasonable in the matter. They--"

"That's enough!" interrupted Gilmore. "You've said all I aim to hear. JI want those warrants. I aim to get 'em, if I have to build a fire under yuh or beat yuh to death with a quirt. I've handled mules before. My methods never fail."

Gilmore looked menacingly at the judge, and drew his wire-bound quirt through his fingers in a manner unpleasantly significant. Trivvy's nerves began to jerk. He strove to preserve his dignity, to appear calm; but there was an uneasy feeling about his digestive tract. He broke out in a gentle perspiration.

"Young man, you are offensive and impudent!" said Judge Trivvy. "Get out of here, or I shall hold you for contempt of court!"

Gilmore laughed.

"Judge," he said, "I don't want to beat yuh to a frazzle. Yo're old, gray-headed, an' fat, an' nobody loves yuh, not even yore friends. Yuh'd ought to 'a' been lynched long ago. How yuh've done escaped it so long is a mystery. This is the way the rope feels, judge!"

Swift as a snake striking, Gilmore's right hand flashed out, and his long fingers twined themselves in the front of the judge's white collar. He gave his hand a slow half-turn. His honor kicked, his honor struggled, his honor beat at Gilmore with his fist; but the judicial complexion went purple very quickly, and the judicial breath became difficult to draw. When the judge was on the verge of gurgling strangulation, Gilmore released the bulging neck and leaned back against the table.

"Yuh see how it is," he said lightly, quite as if he had been demonstrating the best method of rolling a cigarette one-handed.

The manhandling to which he had been subjected had utterly upset the judge's physical and mental balance. He writhed in his chair, clutching his throat, and breathed with difficulty. Shaking in body and limb, he poured himself a stiff four-fingers; but the liquor heartened him not a whit. Instead, it stimulated his imagination. Certainly the unamiable Mr. Shaw would be moved to question and, later, to act, when it should come to his ears that his foreman had been arrested on a warrant signed by Judge Trivvy.

As the vision of the hawk-nosed Mr. Shaw combined with the lively presence of the threatening Mr. Gilmore, it is no wonder that cold terror twanged the judge's heart-strings and his fat knees metaphorically turned to water. Wriggling like a worm, he flapped miserable hands at his tormentor.

"I can't sign those warrants!" he bleated. "You know I can't!"

"So!" Gilmore observed wearily, and pushed the bottle toward the judge. "Have another. Yuh need it."

His honor pettishly thrust the bottle from him. Had he been a woman, he would have wept. As it was, he snuffled while playing eeny-meeny-miny-mo with the sharp horns of the dilemma confronting him.

Beyond a doubt he would be shot if he signed those warrants. If he did not sign them, he would be beaten to a pulp, probably choked, and perhaps killed. This stranger looked like a man who would not balk at murder. It was a lawless country.

His honor's agonized eyes sought the window. In the street, Lavey's baby was playing in the dust. Oh, to be a care-free child again! The forlorn judge groaned aloud in the utter misery of his soul.

Smoky Nivette eyed him contemptuously and rolled a cigarette. The impatient Gilmore leaned forward, gripped the judicial shoulders in his two hands, and shook them vigorously.

"Yo're shore a pore skate of a judge!" he exclaimed. "I heard yuh was crooked enough to hide behind a corkscrew, but I didn't know yuh was yellow. Now you do what I say issue those warrants, an' do it muy pronto, or I'll shore make yuh hard to find!"

He flung Judge Triwy from him and stepped back. His honor, huddled in his chair, goggled at him.

"I'll... I'll..." he stuttered, striving to assert himself.

"Yes?" said Gilmore, bending above him. "You'll do what?"

"I'll do as you suggest!" squeaked the judge. "But--"

His honor clutched the table-edge and stared pop-eyed at nothing. A great light had suddenly shone upon his tortured brain. How ridiculously easy was the way out! He was amazed that he had not thought of it before.

What if he did issue the warrants? The men would be tried before him. The county prosecutor would neither speak for conviction, nor would the jury, packed with V Up-and- Down and Hash Knife adherents, convict the prisoners. All would go merrily as a weddingbell.

His honor almost laughed aloud. He even plucked up sufficient courage to attempt a malevolent glare in Gilmore's direction.

"That's right, yore honor!" chuckled Gilmore. "Screw up yore face thataway, if yuh feel like it, but look me in the eye while yuh do it that is, if yuh mean me!"

Without another word Judge Triwy pulled out his table-drawer, took therffrom two warrants, and proceeded to fill them out. When he had signed his name, he pushed the documents toward Gilmore and sat up with a slight resumption of dignity.

"I shall make you suffer for this!" he declared in a tone which he vainly essayed to make full, round, and rolling. "When Enright returns, I shall at once commit you for contempt of court and assault and battery."

"Hands kind of shaky still, I see," Gilmore observed unheedingly, reading the warrants.

"But they'll do, I guess. What's that about contempt of court?"

"You will know all about that when Enright returns."

"Or Enright will," was Gilmore's happy rejoinder.

"You you" sputtered the judge.

"Fellah, don't make any mistake," Gilmore urged earnestly. "The good old days in Glenn County are past an' done. These two sports" he tapped the warrants with a lean forefinger "are only a beginnin'. Others'll follow just as fast as I can glom onto the evidence. Yuh needn't think, 'cause hoss-thieves an' rustlers have been bossin' the round-up for a while, that they can keep on a-doin' it. No, sir, not by a jugful! There's goin' to be either a heap o' reformin' round here or a full graveyard. There ain't anybody livin' can mind their own business better'n I can, an' this here is my business. I'm just tellin' yuh this so's yuh won't go makin' any fool breaks."

"What can one man do?" the judge queried faintly.

"There are other straight gents in this county. They can't all be crooked. It wouldn't be natural. Think it over. Oh, an' before I forget it, I want to tell yuh these two sharps are in the calaboose right now. Yuh'll try 'em this afternoon better yet, why not try 'em immediate, an' get it all over? That's the ticket. No use delayin' things, judge."

To hear that the two men had already been arrested and lodged in jail, and that he was expected to try them that very afternoon, was distinctly disquieting.

"The district attorney is not in town," asserted the judge. "He went to Fort Henderson for a week or ten days."

"Den she go wit'out hees pant," the half-breed promptly put in. "I see bot' pair hang on hees line when we ride een. I t'ink you ees one beeg liar, Meestair Treevvy!"

"Perhaps, if Mr. Nivette would step down to the district attorney's office" Gilmore began tentatively, staring hard at the judge.

"I go queeck, un I breeng heem here wit' me," interrupted Nivette, and departed forthwith.

Gilmore sat down comfortably on the table and swung his legs. Cheerful as he looked, he knew that he was in a peculiarly tight hole. At any moment the combined forces of the V Upand-Down and the Hash Knife might ride into town. In that event it would be doubtful if he would ever again see Louise Stuart; and he wanted to see her very much.

What a little vixen she was! How those amber eyes could flash and sparkle! And her hair! Never in his life had he seen hair one-quarter so fine and soft. In fact, she was beautiful in every way. That she was the daughter of one whose morals were apparently worse than useless did not in the least militate against the desirableness of the girl.

He realized that there would necessarily be obstacles to surmount. It is not entirely easy to work up even a mild friendship with a girl against whose male relatives one is seeking evidence of crime. But Gilmore had been accustomed to difficulties all his life, and he believed firmly in the cheerful doctrine that if one only wants a thing hard enough, one is almost sure to get it. The judge wondered what the stranger was smiling at.

"Dat deestrect attorney she ees no good today," announced Nivette, entering abruptly. "She varree drunk. I pour watair on heem. I teeckle hees nose. She lie dere lak one peeg. Un 'nodder t'ing. Een Lane's plass, when I go by, I hear two, free talk to odder man, un I t'ink, by gar, dey mean to tak' de prisonair un turn dem loose. Dat ees what I t'ink."

At these bits of news the judge brightened perceptibly. Gilmore looked at him.

"Sounds good to yuh, huh?" he drawled. "Well, you just come trottin' along with me, an' we'll see what it amounts to."

The judge did not wish to go. He much preferred remaining where there was no likelihood of a stray bullet putting an end to his sinful life. That lead would fly was an assured thing. He was well acquainted with the customers frequenting Lane's place, and none of them was a gentle soul.

The judge quaked. He found difficulty in standing, but Gilmore heaved him erect.

"I guess now there won't be any trial this afternoon," said Gilmore to Nivette. "I'll keep the prisoners in jail to-day, an' to-morrow I'll take 'em over to Beardance. The calaboose there sounds kind of safer. No need of temptin' these hold-ups."

"Tak' dem to Beardance!" exclaimed Nivette. "Why--"

"Shore, Beardance is good as any," Gilmore insisted, one eyelid drooped in a slow wink.

Smoky Nivette forbore to demur further. He thought he understood what lay behind Gilmore's words, but he was not sure. The deputy was a surprising person in many ways.

Gilmore, dragging the judge along by a limp wrist, went out into the street. Nivette followed. Gilmore turned his head quickly.

"This ain't really any o' yore business, Mr. Nivette," he said. "It ain't a heap necessary for yuh to ride this trail any farther."

"I go wit' you," observed Nivette. "Sam Kyle, she was my frien', un de man what keell heem should be punish'. Dese prisonair, dey may wan' for shoot you een de back. I watch dem varree sharp!"

"I'm obliged," grinned Gilmore, and went on his way toward Lane's place.

The deputy had already come to feel that he could trust Smoky Nivette, and it was pleasant to know that on this risky expedition the halfbreed would be on guard at his rear.

CHAPTER VII

THE deputy recognized the difficulties of the situation, but he had no qualms regarding his coming meeting with the would-be rescuers. He possessed a tolerably large measure of self-confidence, and the course he was pursuing was the only logical one. Why should he doubt?

As he dragged Judge Trivvy down the street, his progress did not go unmarked. Heads protruded from windows, men lounged into doorways, or started to stroll, elaborately unconcerned, in the same direction. In front of Lane's place, which was next door to the jail, Gilmore released the judge's wrist.

"Have a seat," he said kindly, and deposited the well-nigh palsied jurist on one of the benches flanking the door. "I'd take it as a favor if yuh'd wait outside for me," he added to Nivette, and quietly entered the saloon.

The bar was crowded. So were the two cardtables; but no one was drinking, no one was playing. All were listening to what was being said by a short man standing in the middle of the room. This man's

back was toward the door, but Gilmore perceived that he wore two guns tied down. The short person spoke with great vigor, dashing oaths about with fluent abandon, and beating the palm of one hand with the doubled fist of the other. Gilmore halted just inside the door.

"You all know me," the speaker was saying. "An' I ask yuh, who'll make a better sheriff? I won't make no mistake. I won't go arrestin' town marshals an' V Up-an'-Down foremen. Just to show yuh, I'm goin' down right now an' turn loose them two prisoners, like I told yuh, an' after that I'm a-goin' to run that young squirt of a deputy out o' town."

"I wouldn't do nothin' rash," suggested a calm voice in his immediate rear.

The short man's mouth remained open. His two hands remained poised in mid-air. He did not dare to reach for his guns, for of course the other man had the drop.

Gilmore laughed. He knew what was passing in the enemy's mind. He had not drawn his gun, but he wasted no time in foolhardy dillydallying. He took two swift strides forward, gripped the abbreviated citizen by his collar and the slack of his gun-belt, and heaved him bodily through the doorway.

With a smashing crash and splash, the human comet hit the watering-trough, and Gilmore faced about. His twinkling eyes and fixed, sardonic smile played over the assemblage. No one moved for the length of time required by a strong man to draw three breaths. Then some one turned to the bar and called for drinks. The spell was broken, and business was resumed as usual.

Gilmore walked out. Keen perception was not required to tell him that he had not yet done with this crowd. It would require more than

the mere hurling of one man into the watering- trough to bring it to heel; but it had been surprised into quiescence for the time being, and all that he required for the proper furtherance of his plans was a little time.

Amid the ruins of the watering-trough the short man lay unconscious and breathing stertorously. A little group of citizens surrounded the inert body. One man was kneeling, his fingers employed in searching for possible injuries. The judge, clinging like a limpet to his bench, stared as if fascinated. Nivette stood a little to one side where, if circumstances demanded, his sixshooter would have a free sweep.

Across the street Shorty Damman sat on the front step of his hotel. Shorty's main points of interest were his air of complete detachment and a Sharp's buffalo-gun.

Gilmore walked into the handful of men gathered about the man he had handled, and glanced down at the unconscious face. Redheaded, red-mustached, and red-goateed, the fellow appeared to be a hard customer. A thin trickle of blood showed where a four-inch cut had laid open his scalp.

"Is he busted bad?" questioned Gilmore.

"Only his head, I guess," the kneeling citizen replied shortly. "Take his legs, Bill, will yuh?"

They picked up the red-headed man and departed, a scuffling, side-swaying procession. Gilmore turned to the judge.

"Yuh better trot along after, yore honor," he remarked, flicking a thumb in the direction taken by the carriers and their burden. "Yore friend might feel like swearin' out a warrant."

So saying, Gilmore, followed by Smoky Nivette, walked across the

street to Shorty Damman's hotel. When they entered the barroom, Shorty was just hanging the buffalo-gun on its hooks behind the bar.

"Nothin' like a Sharp's," he remarked, scratching his ear. "She don't scatter like a shotgun, an' she don't shoot as often as a Winchester, but she shore does put in the biggest period. What'll yuh have, gents?"

CHAPTER VIII

GILMORE, well knowing that his life rested in his holster, went to call on the district attorney at four o'clock. He was hoping against hope that Nivette's diagnosis had been too pessimistic; but the half-breed had made no mistake. The county prosecutor, tied down in his bed, was alternately yowling frantically, wailing pitifully, and begging some one to take away the faunal phenomena that he saw disporting themselves on the ceiling.

Gilmore withdrew after one look and returned to his old friend the judge, with whom Nivette was keeping company in his house. The halfbreed did not remove his feet from the table when Gilmore entered. He merely winked a saturnine eye, and remarked that the judge had tried to escape.

Gilmore glanced at the judge, who sat dejectedly in the corner farthest from Nivette. His feet were made fast to the chair-legs, and his hands were tied behind his back. The jurist essayed to speak, but could only gurgle unintelligibly. Gilmore freed him and helped him across to the big chair beside the table. He seemed frightened to death.

"What did yuh do to him?" demanded Gilmore.

"She try for escape," explained Nivette, "un I have my rope. I rope heem, un I beat heem leetle, leetle, not 'nough to hurt one leetle baby. Den I tie heem. Dat ees all."

"Ain't yuh gettin' into this thing kind o' deep?"

The half-breed removed his cigarette from his mouth.

"Dees judge," he said, "ees one bad man, all same horse-t'ief un rustler, lak Sleem, un de marshal, un Jack Shaw, un dat Stuart gang, un de Lazy D outfeet oh, dey are all bad! I know. Well, den, you come. I see you begin for stop de shenanigan. You arrest Sleem un de marshal. You tak' Red Hall by de collar un de pant, un you t'row heem out un bus' hees haid. I see what I see. I know what I know. Un I know you weel mak' de clean-up een Glenn County. Dat ees why eet does not matter what I do to de judge. She cannot have me arrest'. She do not mak' de law. You mak' de law. I see it plain now. I ride wit' you, my frien'."

"I can't appoint you a deputy."

"I do not wan' for be deputy. I do more eef I am not deputy."

"But yore wages--"

"Dam' de money! By gar, I have some money leetle, not much. When you have brought de law un de ordair, den I weel start de freight-wagon line from Virgin City to de railroad, un I weel mak' much money. Long time I have wan' for do dat, but pas de' chance! Too many t'ief. But now you come for drive out de t'ief. I be fool eef I not help you. Also dere ees somet'ing you forget, mabbeso. Sam Kyle was my frien', un Sleem Dennison ees not dead. De men behin' Sleem, dey are not dead. You see now?"

Gilmore said nothin', but he stretched out his arm and shook hands

with the half-breed. The latter smiled after the fashion of the cat which contemplates a meal of fat canary. Judge Trivvy, observing it, shuddered.

"Yore honor," Gilmore said, "it seems like luck is with yuh now. Owin' to the district attorney seein' things, the case of 'People versus Slim Dennison an' Tim Simms,' can't be opened to-day. But maybe, it's just as well. Maybe Plain Edge ain't just the place to try this case, after all. The climate in Beardance may be a mite healthier. So I'm takin' 'em there to-morrow aft'noon. Whenever yo're ready, scamper over an' try 'em. Just write me here or at Virgin City, an' I'll be on hand with witnesses. Yuh understand it all plain, don't yuh, yore honor?"

His honor thought he did. The removal of the prisoners to Beardance would make matters much easier for the judge; for the Hash Knife and the V Up-and-Down were strong in Beardance. The prisoners would be rescued with ease before the opening of the trial.

The judicial breath became freer. The atmosphere was not so oppressive as it had been. He assured the deputy of his hearty concurrence in any move that Gilmore saw fit to make.

"I'm glad yuh look at it that way," the deputy observed dryly. "Do yuh know, though, I kind o' thought yuh would!"

There was a certain grimness underlying the words that tended to renew the judge's feeling of helplessness. He was overjoyed when Gilmore and the wily Nivette started toward the door.

Before they reached it, it was flung crashingly open, and a tremendously tall man with a scar on his chin stood in the doorway. He wore the star of a deputy and one gun tied down. His thumbs were hooked into his belt, and his washedout gray eyes roved with

questioning surliness from Gilmore to Nivette, from Nivette to Judge Trivy.

"What's this I hear about Slim Dennison an' Tim Simms bein' arrested?" he demanded quietly of the judge.

"Yuh heard they're in the calaboose," Gilmore answered for the other. "Yuh heard correct. They're there, an' they stay there till I choose to move 'em."

The mouth of the scar-chinned man tightened till the lips went white. His eyes narrowed to two pin-points of light.

"Till you choose!" he said slowly. "An' who might you be?"

Gilmore told him diffidently, almost timidly.

He even shuffled backward a foot or two. The eyes of the other widened slightly. He stepped quickly up to Gilmore and stood looking down into the smaller man's eyes. The bright blue eyes wavered and dropped the fraction of an inch.

Nivette, puzzled at his friend's apparent lack of nerve, frowned frowned till he happened to notice the position of Gilmore's feet on the floor. Then he smiled a pleased smile.

"Young feller," the tall man growled in a harsh, incisive tone, tapping Gilmore on the chest with a crooked forefinger; "young feller, yuh can't run no blazers in this county, see! There's only one deputy around here, an' that's me Dick Enright. I'm goin' to throw them men loose right now, an' I'm a-goin' to take yore star away from yuh. A chicken-liver like you ain't fit to wear it!"

He made a motion to seize the star on Gilmore's lapel. The stretching fingers barely touched the metal, however, for Gilmore's

right fist, starting from below the hip, flashed upward, and with all Gilmore's weight behind it struck the scar-chinned man under the left ear.

Lifted fairly off his feet, Enright described a ragged parabola and landed on his head on a chair. This broke his fall to some extent, but the chair was reduced to its component parts. Gilmore blew upon his knuckles, gave his chaps a hitch, and proceeded to search the senseless Mr. Enright with thoroughness. Excluding meaningless personal belongings, the sole result of the search was a playing-card, the ace of spades, the face of which bore a scribbled memorandum. This he read with surprised interest before transferring it to an inside vest-pocket.

When he was satisfied that Enright was concealing nothing else of any importance about his person, Gilmore hastened the passing of time by wetting him down with bucketful upon bucketful of water brought from the judge's well. Nivette, the Gallic side of him rejoiced beyond measure, assisted with enthusiasm at the drenching.

"By gar," chuckled the half-breed, "when you wus act scare, I do not know what to t'ink. Den I see how you' right foot was stand way behin' de lef on de floor, iin how you' right shoulder was drop leetle, un den I know what was goin' happen. By gar, Deeck Enright she weigh two hundred poun' easy, un you leef heem clean off floor lak she was nottin' 't all. You heet lak de mule keeck. I am glad you are my frien'. By gar, I am!"

Nivette whooped with a fresh attack of merriment and inadvertently emptied his bucket into the judge's lap. Entered then upon this scene of chaotic dampness Shorty Damman. The wispy one tilted his hat and reflectively scratched an ear.

"I just come down to tell yuh," he remarked, "that Dick Enright was

back, an' was yowlin' round 'bout what he's a-goin' to do to folks he don't like. But I see yo're a-puttin' Dick's fire out, all right. Howdy, judge? Looks like Plain Edge is a-goin' to witness times, don't it? What do you guess?"

But the judge was not guessing, and the neighborly Mr. Damman went back to his hotel, after assuring the deputy that if trouble arose he and a few friends would back Gilmore and Nivette to the limit.

"What I tell you?" exclaimed the half-breed, when the hotel-keeper had gone. "What I tell you? Shorty, she ees good feller, you bet. What you t'ink, dees feller Deeck Enright she need more water?"

When Enright came to, he was impressed by the fact that his world was composed of a heaving floor and a pain in the head. Following several efforts, he contrived to sit upright. Gingerly he caressed the lump on his frontal bone. His aching eyes finally rested on Gilmore, who was sitting on the edge of the table, nonchalantly swinging his legs and fingering Enright's own gun.

"Glad to see yo're feelin' like old times again," Gilmore observed genially. "Yuh won't know yuh'd ever been hit, come to-morrow."

"Gimme my gun, an' I'll show yuh!" Enright grunted thickly.

"Shore yuh will! Don't doubt it for a minute. You look like yuh were a hard gent, a real bad man; but yo're careless, terrible careless. That's why I'm a-keepin' yore gun. Don't want yuh to go hurtin' yoreself with it."

"I'll kill you on sight!"

"My, my, how fierce we are to-day! But before yuh go shootin' up a pore innocent little orphan fellah like me, just think is it worth while? Yuh see, Enright, I don't care a. thing about bein' shot up personal.

that is, I don't. But I'm a deputy; an' bein' that I just gotta beef anybody that cuts down on me with a gun. No two ways about it, I just gotta. Yuh see how it is I can't help myself. An' I wish yuh'd be a good fellah an' go slow. I'd take it as a real favor if yuh would."

Nivette snickered. Enright did not even grunt. He was too angry. After a time Gilmore slid from the table.

"Able to walk, Enright?" he queried tenderly. "If yuh are, we'll go down to the calaboose. I got somethin' I want to show yuh."

"I'll go," the partly rejuvenated Enright snarled through writhing lips. "I'll go, 'cause I gotta! But I'll getcha, feller! I'll getcha if it takes a hundred years!"

"Now where have I heard that remark before?" Gilmore chuckled. "But there's no sense in bein' mean, Mr. Enright. Why not make it a thousand years? Yuh got all the time there is."

Enright did not reply. He passed out stumblingly into the street.

With Enright slightly in the lead this time that he might not be tempted to snatch at the weapons swinging at his captors' belts the three walked slowly along the street.

"Yuh can stop here," said Gilmore, when they arrived in front of the calaboose. t-

The wondering Enright obeyed. Gilmore strode quickly to the side of the street, stooped, and returned with an empty sardine-can. This he hurled straight up into the air, and fanned his gun at it. The battered piece of tin fell almost at Enright's feet.

By this time there was quite a crowd of Plain Edgers looking on, and more were coming. Shorty Damman and his friends, standing in front

of the hotel, nudged one another in the ribs and grinned delightedly. They did not like Dick Enright.

Nivette came forward and picked up the sardine-can. There were six holes in it. He held the can before Enright's sullen eyes. The deputy sneered and started to walk away.

"Wait," commanded Gilmore, and Enright turned back. "Chuck her up again, will yuh, Smoky?" he added.

The half-breed complied. Again Gilmore fanned a six-shooter Enright's own gun, this time; but now, when the can fell, it no longer bore the remotest resemblance to a container for fish.

"There's no tellin' how often I hit it this trip," drawled Gilmore; "but yuh can take it, Enright, that I come pretty close."

"Yes, yuh did, all right," muttered Enright, and with a catlike spring he launched his huge body at Gilmore.

There was a twinkling flash from the neighborhood of Gilmore's neck, and Enright staggered back, clutching his left shoulder. Gilmore stood quietly, a nine-inch bowie-knife in his hand. From the point blood dripped slowly into the dust of the street.

"That's the second time yuh made a mistake about me, Enright," Gilmore observed dispassionately. "Just 'cause I emptied my gun an' yores ain't a sign that I'm out on a limb. Yuh poor fool, what do yuh s'pose I did this kid's trick o' shootin' at a can for? To show yuh I could fan a gun, or to draw yuh on which? Enright, yuh've misguessed me twice. The third time ought to be the charm."

Enright made no rejoinder. He was too greatly occupied in stanching the knife-cut in his upper arm. Smiling his fixed, peculiar smile,

Gilmore swung his eyes from amused contemplation of Enright to the crowd in front of Lane's place. He stood for a moment, and then went to the corral to see if all was as it should be with the horses.

"Say, what you mean by savin' we tak' de prisonair to Beardance to-morrow?" inquired the puzzled Nivette. "By gar, Beardance ees not safe for leave dem, un eef we wait teel to-morrow you un me weel not go 't all."

"Why do yuh s'pose I told the judge in the first place?" countered Gilmore. "If I was goin' to Beardance, he'd be the last fellah I'd tell, wouldn't he? I told him we were goin' to slide out for Beardance to-morrow because you an' I an' the prisoners are goin' to pull our freight for Warrior's Mark to-night."

"Ah, now I see!" exclaimed the enlightened Nivette.

"Even waitin' till to-night ain't any more popular with me than it is with you," continued Gilmore; "but we gotta do it. Can't afford to take the prisoners out o' town in plain sight o' their friends. We just gotta risk the Hash Knife boys gettin' here first."

"Dey should be here now."

"I know it; but they ain't, an' we are. All we gotta do is not fret, keep our heads up, an' lean back a little. Are you with me?"

"I am with you, but--"

"Remember what I said 'bout not frettin' any now. Here, what do yuh think o' this bit o' light readin'?"

He held out to Nivette the playing-card he had taken from Dick Enright. The scribbled lines of the memorandum above the black pip read:

no X 15 = 1,650

1,650 - 4 - 2 = 825

Below the pip they ran:

I. O. U. \$825

T.J.

"Well, what do dis mean?" questioned Nivette, raising mystified eyes.

"What are cows bringin' now?" was Gilmore's rejoinder.

"Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen roun' dere, I guess."

"For a hundred an' ten cows at fifteen a fellah' d get sixteen an' fifty dollars, wouldn't he? Well, then, s'pose he divided the same with another gent? Still ramblin' along on our supposin' way, if he didn't feel like handin' over the eight hundred an' a quarter, he'd write out an I. O. U. for the dinero an' give it to him, wouldn't he?"

"M,abbeso yes."

"Good. I guess yo're beginnin' to see what I see. Is Tom Johnson o' the Lazy D friends with this Enright hold-up?"

"Eef she ees, she keep quiet 'bout eet. She all time varree good frien's wit' de Hash Knife un de V Up-un-Down."

"Even so, these here initials 'T. J.' in Enright's possession don't grow on every bush. They might stand for Tessie Jones, a hasher I knew once over in Omaha, only they ain't in Tessie's handwritin'. All this

bein' plain to the naked eye, I'm gamblin' it'll help to clear the air if the reason for T. J.'s givin' an I. O. U. to Dick Enright was looked into. There's no use o' talkin', the law has got to be above suspicion, especially when cows are sellin' at fifteen dollars a head. We can't have T. J. corruptin' our county officers. It ain't any way to act at all. No, sir, I guess now I better go pay this T. J. a visit at the Lazy D."

"I will go, too."

"Yuh will not. I'm obliged to yuh, Smoky; but this is just goin' to be a little, friendly call nothin' serious at all. Yuh can gamble an' go the limit Mr. Johnson an' me will get along just as comfortable as two heifers an' a fence-post. Yuh wait an' see!"

"I guess I see all right," muttered Nivette. "I guess I see what I do not wan' for see, mabbeso."

But Gilmore only laughed at him.

CHAPTER IX

THAT his position was sufficiently perilous Gilmore realized perfectly well; but it did not in the least affect his demeanor or prevent him from taking a chair on the narrow strip of porch in front of the hotel and making himself comfortable in the full rays of the westering sun. There he sat and joyously whistled most of his repertory of tunes. Red Hall, still somewhat shaky in the knees, heard him where he sat in a friend's kitchen.

"Just as soon as my head stops whirlin'," asserted Red, "I'm a-goin' to take a shotgun an' canter out an' bust him wide open."

"I would," was the friend's sarcastic comment. "I shore would; but I wouldn't do it today, nor yet to-morrow. To tell yuh the truth, the farther

off yuh set that job the better she sounds. You was lyin' down in here, so yuh didn't see him flip a knife into Dick. Well, I didn't see him, neither, an' I wasn't thirty foot off, with my eyes clamped on the pair of 'em. But the knife slipped into Dick all right. That gent is one slow flash o' lightnin'. I don't mind a gun. I'll go ag'in' the iron any time I gotta, but I ain't carin' just nothin' at all about a knife, an' that's whatever!"

"I'm a-goin to get him," insisted the stubborn Red.

"Six o' Enright's friends are goin' to try it to-night."

"They are?"

"Shore 'bout three or four in the mornin', when him an' that breed friend o' his are sleepin' sound. Oh, they'll get him all right! I'm for gettin' him, but not that way. I say, give him a short run for his money. Call him out in the street, f'r instance, an' then blow him apart; but that don't strike them as no way to do it."

"Any way's good," Red persisted vindictively.

"Perhaps," returned the friend, "but yuh hear me talkin'. That feller's a long way from dead, an' I don't want nothin' to do with rubbin' him out, not nohow."

Red grunted sulkily. He would have enjoyed frying Mr. Gilmore in oil. Oh, what a headache!

That night Slim Dennison, who had been sleeping for several hours, sat upright with a jerk. There was a struggle going on in the sheriff's old room. The partition was of squared logs, but he could plainly hear the stamp and go of feet and the hard-drawn breathing of wrestling men. Dennison knew that Gilmore and Nivette were both in there, or had been, for he had heard their voices before he fell asleep. He

shook Simms awake, and together they listened tensely.

"They're a-goin' to rescue us, all right," said the marshal.

"Shore, but who is they?"

"It ain't the Hash Knife or the boys from Virgin City. They'd shoot ail' be done with it. It must be our friends here."

"I guess. Wish they'd hurry. My wrists is wore clean through with these blamed cuffs. If I ever get a-holt o' that Gilmore!"

"He'll be cashed by then. Listen!"

Smack! Thud! a heavy body fell to the floor. Something was dragged across the boards.

"They're a-takin' the remainders out," chuckled Slim.

The marshal swore with pleasure.

Returning footsteps sounded in the other room. The door between it and the jail proper was quietly unbarred and opened. In the dim light cast by a shaded lantern on the table the two prisoners could see a man attired in a slicker. His hat was pulled low over his forehead, and a blue bandanna handkerchief with staring eyeholes concealed his face. The masked man stood in the doorway, beckoning.

"Come on, boys!" he said in a husky whisper. "Let's get out o' this!"

The two prisoners pushed into the other room. The masked man was already at the outer door.

"Take off these cuffs, friend!" called the marshal.

"Shhh!" The masked one wheeled quickly, his hand up.

"Take 'em off! What's the matter with yuh?"

"Shut up, you idjits!" came the husky rejoinder. "Yore cuffs'll have to be filed. The keys ain't on Nivette. I searched him careful after I carved him an' drug him outside. But Gilmore's round some'eres. The rest o' the bunch are lookin' for him now. Anyhow, just to save trouble, we've decided to take you fellers out o' town till Gilmore's been got. He's too slippery a jack to risk anythin' with. So follow me close an' don't make no noise."

The prisoners were in no mood to demur at anything. At that moment their one burning desire in life was to get out of jail. Quietly they followed the masked man out beyond the picketline of tin cans encircling the town.

Their guide led them unerringly to where a dark mass blocked their advance. The dark mass proved to be a man and four horses. The night was too black for the man's features to be distinguished. The masked one and his comrade assisted the handcuffed men to mount, mounted themselves, took each a prisoner's bridle, and rode off at a walk.

Several times Slim Dennison and the marshal essayed to open a conversation, but their efforts met with no encouragement. Huskily whispered monosyllables were their portion, till finally, after several miles had been covered, they became suspicious.

"Say, who are you?" demanded the marshal.

"Dal Gilmore," replied the man who had taken them from the jail.

This time he did not speak in a whisper. Twitching the bandanna from his face, he stuffed it into the pocket of his slicker. It was still too

dark to see his face, but the voice was sufficient evidence. Slim and the marshal did not swear. They were too far gone in raging disgust for that.

Gilmore's comrade laughed in keen enjoyment of the situation.

"So you t'ink I was cash een?" he said. "Well, I was not. But she was good fight you hear all right all same real t'ing."

"Yuh see, boys," Gilmore put in, "I knew if yore friends here in Plain Edge was worth the powder to blow 'em up, they'd scamper out an' try an' rescue you fellahs to-night. They'd have to. They couldn't let me run blazers on 'em forever! So I just figured I'd better rescue yuh first, an' work it so's yuh'd think it was yore friends an' not go raisin' the roof. That's how it was."

Slim Dennison and the marshal remained speechless.

When the sky ahead of them lightened, they perceived that they were being taken eastward. This was disquieting. It might mean Warrior's Mark, which town was as nearly neutral as a town can be in the cattle country. They didn't know a soul in the place, either. Inquiry elicited an answer confirming their suspicion. Plunged in deepening gloom, they rode onward to the sprightly tune of "The Keel Row," whistled by Gilmore.

In the middle of the morning they left the trail and turned into a dry stream-bed choked with boulders and windfalls. This, according to Nivette's explanation, would lop some twenty miles from their journey.

The going was hard, even for that country. Twice the marshal's horse fell, and, a weak cinch snapping under the strain of swelling lungs, Slim Dennison's saddle turned and he was pitched off on his head. Luckily for Slim he landed in a patch of sand; but, as he profanely

pointed out, it might just as well have been a rock. Taking it by and large, the trip was not without incident.

When they left the stream-bed they rode diagonally up the side of a mountain Pack- Saddle Mountain, Nivette called it through pine woods, till they came out six hours later on a broad, treeless shelf where bunch-grass grew thickly. On this shelf they dismounted and loosened cinches. Nivette fumbled in a saddlepocket and brought forth an excellent pair of field-glasses.

"De judge was len' dem to me," he vouchsafed with a leer.

"The judge did Judge Trivvy, yuh mean?"

"Shore. She ees de generous feller. I look at dem, un I say, 'Weel you len' dem to me?' Un by gar, she does len' dem. You see dat long cedair by de beeg rock? Well, from dat tree, near de top, you can see de trail from Plain Edge to Warrior Mark. Dat dry wash we have rode see dat too. I weel rustle de bacon un de coffee."

Gilmore took the hint and the field-glasses. Climbing the tree as high as he dared, he stood on a limb and swept the tangle of mountain, flat, and valley to the west and north. He found the trail without difficulty could see it plainly where it looped across a hillside or dipped down into a valley. It was empty of all travelers, but not so the dry stream-bed. Strung along it, moving black dots testified to the presence of horsemen.

Gilmore counted more than a dozen of these dots. Unhurriedly he slid down from his perch and walked back to where Nivette had a small fire going. The prisoners looked at him curiously, hopefully.

"Not a thing in sight," announced Gilmore. "Where'll I put these glasses?"

"I tak' dem," said Nivette, rising and following Gilmore across to his horse.

"There's seventeen of 'em ridin' along the wash," Gilmore whispered, his back turned. "They're 'bout fourteen or fifteen miles away. We'll start soon's we eat."

Nivette made no reply. He merely returned the field-glasses to his saddle-bag and strolled unconcernedly back to the fire. Gilmore rolled a cigarette and pretended to occupy himself with inspecting the dun's feet. The expression of the prisoners became considerably less hopeful.

When they had eaten, they mounted and rode onward. Crossing the treeless shelf and rounding a spur of the mountain, they plowed into crackling jack-pines and feathery, stunted cedars. Then they began to climb again, up and up, the thin wind of the high places singing in their ears.

As they climbed, the stunted cedars became fewer and the jack-pines grew gnarled and lower to the ground. When finally they passed the last gnome-like little tree, and came out on the brown reaches of sunburnt grass above timberline, they halted and looked back over the way they had come.

The view would have delighted the soul of an artist, but Gilmore and Nivette did not notice the scenery. Their puckered eyes roved over the back trail, striving to pick up the pursuing riders. Even with the field-glasses they saw no moving object.

"Yuh'll find they're a-comin' after yuh all right," the marshal sneered at a venture.

"Y'betcha!" chimed in Slim. "An' then--"

"There's a little word called 'if,'" interrupted Gilmore. "Only a little word she is, two letters, but they're shore harder to cross than the Rocky Mountains. Goon, Slim! 'Scuse me for snubbin' yuh up. What was yore valuable contribution to the conversation goin' to be?"

But Slim, apparently, had forgotten what he meant to say.

"Might as well mosey along," Gilmore suggested in his most casual tone.

Nivette led the way, quartering across the easy slopes. After a time Gilmore saw that the mountain was not one mountain, but two, and that they were herding toward a notch between the twin peaks. They reached the pass an hour later, crossed it, and rode straight down the reverse slope.

"You see dat mountain 'bout forty mile off?" queried Nivette. "No, not dat one de one wit' de bald head. Well, dat ees War-Bonnet Mountain een de Saddle Range, un dees side de mountain, right unner de bald spot, dere ees Warrior' Mark."

"We'll make it easy," observed Gilmore.

"Shore we weel! No trouble at all."

Suddenly, when they were still a half-mile above timber-line, Slim Dennison's horse went lame in the off foreleg. The animal did not limp a great deal, but any lameness at that time and place was serious.

Three minutes later the marshal's horse began to limp on its off fore. Gilmore's eyes narrowed.

"Say, Smoky," he called, "guess we'd better stop right here a shake.

Gotta tie the feet o' these gents."

"Tie our feet!" bellowed the indignant marshal. "Whadda yuh want to tie our feet for?"

"So's yuh won't go stickin' yore toes in between the points o' yore bosses' elbows an' barrels, an' makin' 'em go lame," Gilmore explained calmly. "You fellahs make me sick! Yo're bein' treated like folks, which yuh don't deserve, an' yuh gotta act thisaway. I tell yuh flat, I don't want any trouble with you sports, an' I don't aim to have it no, sir, not jsven if I have to hog-tie yuh an' pack yuh like flour!"

Much to the prisoners' disgust, their feet were tied. The journey was resumed, and before the four had been riding through timber an hour the lameness of the two horses had disappeared. Observing which, Gilmore nodded his head contentedly.

"I kind o' thought they'd work it out," he remarked. "You fellahs didn't stick yore toes in quite far enough."

When they reached the bottom of the mountain, a wide, grassy valley between high hills opened before them. They rode into the valley and breasted a fringe of dwarfish red willows beside a tiny brook, of which they drank, and allowed the horses to drink a few swallows no more, for there is nothing like ice-cold mountain water to give a sweating horse the colic.

"I've done lost all feelin' in my laigs," complained the marshal.

"Time enough to begin to worry when yuh lose all feelin' in yore neck," was Gilmore's heartening response. "Do yuh want another drink, Slim?"

"Not o' that rank water I don't."

"Suit yoreself. How far to the Mark, Smoky?"

"Bout twenty mile. We fin' de trail varree quick now."

Ten minutes later they rode into the trail the narrow, grass-grown stage-trail between Plain Edge and Warrior's Mark. The sun had long since gone down behind the twin peaks of Pack- Saddle. Gilmore, spurred by the thought of the seventeen questing along the back track, drove his little cavalcade mercilessly through the strange, slow twilight of the high country and on into the blue-blackness of the night. Not till Nivette's horse began to stumble occasionally did he slow down to a brisk walk.

And brisk it was. With quirt and spur the ponies were kept going. Three of them were desperately weary. The strong and hardy dun showed no sign of suffering; but then he never did. Gilmore had never yet attained the limit of his horse's powers.

"What's yore hurry?" growled the peevish Slim. "If I gotta be stretched, I gotta be stretched, an' that's all there is to her; but I has objections to ridin' to death first. Not that I'm tired. I never get tired, but, what with my laigs bein' tied down an' all, I'm kind o' glued to the saddle. If yuh hasn't no serious objections I'd shore admire to get off an' kick a tree good an' hard, just to see if I'm paralyzed or not."

"Aw, shut up!" snapped the marshal. "Paralyzed, huh? Me, I'm plumb dead from the belt down, an' I been that way a long time. Somebody's a-goin' to pay for all this!" he added darkly.

"It's all yore fault, yuh id jit!" snarled Slim. "If yuh'd 'a' waited, like I wanted to, till we got in among them trees, an' then yuh'd 'a' cut down on him, we wouldn't be here now! But no, yuh knowed it all, yuh did, an' yuh had to go pullin' at yore gun while we was still out in the open. Course ye got nicked. 'Stead o' just a finger, I wish it had been yore

fool head!"

"Yuh do, huh? Well, if yuh'd V used yore fool head yuh'd 'a' waited to beef Sam Kyle till after dark, instead o' drillin' him in broad daylight. Well, yuh got a long chance o' gettin' his woman now, haven't yuh? For all yore sneakin' an' snoopin' an' hangin' round she never would have nothin' to do with yuh, an' she won't now, yuh can gamble an' go the limit on that!"

"To hell with her!" sneered Slim. "She ain't such a much. I guess I'll just have to cut out Jack Shaw an' Dick Enright with you know who. They ain't got no chance anyway. She don't like 'em. She'll talk to 'em, but what's that? Why, say, one day when I met her out on the range she an' me had quite a confab. We dumb off our horses an' set down ag'in' a log; an', say, it wasn't no time 'fore I had my arm round her waist an' was kissin' her forty to the minute."

"Yo're a liar!"

"If I had my gun I'd show yuh; but long's I ain't I'll just tell yuh to go ask her, next time yuh see her. Yuh just ask her! I tell yuh, Tim, it was shore a large time we had, Louise Stuart an' me!"

Swish! Crack! A quirt's double thongs lashed Slim Dennison across the face. A horse crowded alongside, and Gilmore leaned toward him.

"Shut yore dirty mouth!" the deputy whispered tensely. "Yo're a liar an' a skunk, an' if yuh say one more word about that lady in any way or meanin' whatever, I'll pull yuh off that hoss an' beat yuh to a whisper!"

Slim Dennison was too surprised to utter a word at first.

"Yuh know I'm handcuffed--" he began thickly.

"Yo're lucky. If yuh'd 'a' been free an' footloose, an' packin' a gun, yuh'd be flockin' to the golden stairs right now. Now close yore face!"

CHAPTER X

It was almost midnight when they rode into Warrior's Mark. Gilmore routed out an amazed marshal and requested him to open the jail. The marshal complied with alacrity, and Slim Dennison and Tim Simms once more sat down on a hard floor and looked at the star-dusted heavens through barred windows.

The marshal, a bow-legged gentleman named Doheny, listened without comment while Gilmore explained the situation and its possibilities.

"How soon do yuh expect yore friends to drift in?" he inquired, when he had the whole story.

"If their hosses are holdin' out, they ought to be here in a hour, more or less," replied Gilmore. "They're ten or twelve miles behind, I guess."

"I'll get a few o' the boys together," said Doheny, caressing his square chin. "They might want to run a blazer on us, or somethin'."

But even as he uttered the words there was a far-away drum of horses galloping.

"I guess that's them," Gilmore observed calmly, and took his Winchester from the saddle.

Smoky led the horses to the rear of the jail, and Doheny hurried to get help. When the halfbreed returned with his rifle, he found Gilmore

sitting comfortably on the jail steps, the Winchester across his knees.

"Take a seat, Smoky," invited Gilmore, moving over. "Nothin' like restin' easy while we can."

They were sitting there when the would-be rescuers, seventeen shadowy riders, loped their staggering ponies up the town's one street and halted in front of the jail. In the darkness they did not at first perceive the two motionless figures seated on the steps.

"They must 'a' got here," said one rider. "I'll get the marshal."

"No need o' that," remarked Gilmore, slightly shifting his Winchester. "The marshal will be hack in a minute."

"I knowed they was here!" exclaimed the man who had spoken.

Another rider spurred forward.

"Not too close!" was Gilmore's soft-spoken suggestion.

The man checked his horse.

"Yuh shore are slick," he said. "We give yuh credit for gettin' here first an' sudden, but it won't do yuh no good. Judge Triwy has annulled them two warrants, an' we've come for the prisoners. We don't want no trouble, but we've come for the prisoners."

Gilmore's unquenchable spirit rose to meet the menace in the other's tone.

"So yuh've come for the prisoners," he repeated tenderly. "Now that's what I call publicspirited. There ain't many gents would take the trouble; an' after to-night, if yo're still certain shore yuhVe come for the prisoners, there won't be so many. No, sir, such public-spirited

gents, sot in their ways, are a heap likely to grow less in number as time rolls on. Think it over, gents, think it over!"

"Say, I tell you we've" the spokesman began angrily.

"No hurry," Gilmore hastened to assure him, "Take yore time. We've got the whole evenin', an' I ain't in a bit of a hurry. To tell yuh the truth, we were gettin' a heap lonesome, my pardner an' me, an' we was just wishin' somebody'd sift in an' sort o' liven things up, when here yuh come. Luck, I call it, an' Say, fellah, you on the white boss, I wouldn't go f ussin' at any gun. It always makes me jumpy an' nervous like when a gent starts pickin' at his artillery. Here's my Winchester a-pointin' plumb at the abdomen o' the tall sport who's been doin' all the talkin'. Now he has a right nice-soundin' way o' makin' a speech. I shore enjoyed hearin' what he had to say. But an' here we come to the bottom of the well but I'll shore have to drill him a lot if I get any nervouser. I thank you, Mr. White Horse. I kind o' hoped yuh'd see it my way. The sharps in the back, the ones I can't see very well 'count o' their bein' sort o' behind the others, can take it for granted that Mr. Nivette is lookin' after their interests. The shadow that just slid down to the corner of the jail is Mr. Nivette. Now that we understand each other, what can I do for yuh? If yuh don't see what yuh want, ask for it."

"Don't be a fool!" cautioned the spokesman, while the others muttered profanely among themselves. "We got yuh, an' yuh know it. There ain't no two ways about it. Yuh gotta turn over them prisoners, or we'll fill yuh full o' lead!"

"Yuh've been hintin' at that right steady ever since yuh rode in," complained Gilmore. "Try somethin' new, can't yuh?"

"Yuh won't give 'em up?" The speaker's tone was rasping.

"Yuh make me plumb weary," said Gilmore. "Why, fellah, look what's

comin' in behind yuh!"

Involuntarily the entire seventeen turned their heads. What they saw was sufficient. Rolling swiftly toward them was a confused mass which, on its nearer approach, resolved itself into the town marshal heading a deputation consisting of most of the male citizens of Warrior's Mark. The citizens silently lined up along the edge of the street. The marshal stepped forward and confronted the leader of the Plain Edge men.

"What do yuh want?" Doheny demanded.

"Them two prisoners," the Plain Edger told him. "Yore holdin' 'em ain't legal. The judge who issued the warrants has annulled 'em. Here's my authority."

He held a paper toward Doheny.

"You didn't show that to me," Gilmore said reproachfully, rising and joining the marshal. "Let's see it!"

He took the paper from Doheny's willing hand, and struck a match. Calmly he held the flame to the edge of the judicial notice.

"Hey, whatcha doin'?" the Plain Edge leader bawled.

"Don'tcha move!" rejoined Doheny.

The paper burned swiftly. Gilmore dropped the last flickering shred before it burned his fingers, and looked up at the Plain Edger.

"Now where's your authority?" he inquired cheerfully.

"Yuh'll be sorry for this!" the other replied heatedly. "Doheny, I call on you to release them prisoners."

"What prisoners?" was Doheny's parry.

"The ones in the calaboose. Yuh can't tell us they ain't there. We know better. We want 'em right now, an' we're a-goin to have 'em!"

"There he goes beginnin' all over again," groaned Gilmore.

"Well, I'd shore admire to oblige yuh," Doheny asserted; "but it can't be did nohow. I can't go throwin' the jail open to all comers an' releasin' prisoners thisaway. Special I can't when I ain't got no written authority, no official order, y' understand."

"But--"

"I know, gents, but why talk about it? What I'm tellin' yuh goes as it lays, an' no bets coppered. S'posin' you an' yore friends pull yore freight! To tell yuh the truth, if yo're gummin' up the view three minutes from now, yo're mighty likely to be with us some few of a time!"

The Plain Edge men did not stand upon the order of their going. When the clatter of their departure had become inaudible, the marshal's reinforcements dispersed, and the officer himself sat down upon the jail steps with Gilmore and Nivette.

"I don't like that annulling notice," Doheny abruptly announced.

"Meanin'?" was Gilmore's quiet question.

"Oh, I don't mean yore burnin' the thing. That was all right; but if they bring another one signed by Triwy, what can I do? I'll have to honor it."

"Will yuh?"

"If I don't, all they have to do is sue out a writ o' habeas corpus. I can't get round that, not nohow."

"Yuh can if yuh make another charge against him."

"Another charge?" Doheny repeated stupidly.

"Shore, another charge," Gilmore chuckled. "Yuh see, the habeas corpus writ only covers the arrest for murder. If there's an additional charge o' rustlin' or vagrancy oh, 'most any little thing'll do why, then the writ don't travel a foot. All yuh gotta do is keep makin' additional charges as fast as they bring up writs. O' course, it ain't strictly fair, an' I dunno as it's strictly legal, but it can be done."

"Ye-es," assented the dubious marshal, "but--"

"Now don't start in with any buts, Yuh know as well as I that the bunch in Plain Edge an' Virgin City are the busiest lot o' lawbreakers outside o' jail. They gotta be stopped, an' it don't matter real particular how they're stopped."

"This thing's been goin' on for years. What can one or two men do?"

"You hold these two fellahs an' I'll show yuh what one or two men can do."

The marshal scratched his head. He slowly rolled a cigarette, lit it, and smoked, inhaling deeply. Gilmore and Nivette waited patiently.

"If nobody brings me any habeas corpus writs, I'll hold them two boys for yuh long's yuh like," the marshal said at last. "But if their friends do sue out writs an' they will, y'betcha I can't make out to keep 'em more'n a month or six weeks. That's the best I can do."

"That's good enough for a dog. A fellah can do quite a jag o' work in

six weeks. I'm shore obliged to yuh for helpin' us out!"

"That's all right. How about comin' over to my shack an' restin' yore hats, gents?"

CHAPTER XI

DURING the ride from Warrior's Mark, Gilmore had artfully brought round the subject of conversation to women-folk in general. From this as a basis it had been easy to work up to specific cases.

"You bet you," Smoky affirmed, "Meesus Mary jane ees one fine woman. She ees good beezness man un good-lookin' een de face, too. I like her, me."

"Not many others like her around, are there?"

Gilmore's tone was plainly casual. Nivette gave him a sharp look.

"I weel tell you, my Men'," he remarked. "Dere ees one odair, un dat ees Mees Louise Stuart. She ees one grande demoiselle by gar, she ees! All tarn she wear de pant like de man. Nevair she wear de dress, nevair. But all de same she ees what I say. One tarn when I was seeck ovair at Benson's ranch, she bring me medicine un feex me up. But dat was before de trouble between de Hash Knife un de Lazy D. She was onlee fourteen year old den. Her people, dey are t'iefs, but because dey are dat does not hurt her. No, by gar, eet does not! Un she mus' not be hurt een dees row."

"She won't be hurt."

"Eet ees not my beezness," said the halfbreed, his hard, black eyes boring into Gilmore's steady blue ones; "un you can tell me for to shut de mouth, but Mees Stuart she ees my frien'. For her I would fight

whole tribe Enjun. Un I ask you, my frien', how you lak her?"

"I love her," Gilmore replied simply. "Some day I mean to marry her."

"Den dat ees all right," smiled Nivette. "You are de good man, un I weesh you all de luck een de worl'. I have t'ink 'bout dis long time evair since you heet Sleem across de jaw wit' de quirt un I have wonder. Well, I am glad, my frien', for now I know."

"Say, Smoky, don't she ever wear skirts?"

"Nobody see Mees Stuart een a dress, jamais nevair, lak I say. Eet ees alway de pant."

"Well, of course, I don't care, but--"

"Don' you wreenkle de forehead ovair dat," comforted the half-breed. "Eef you can mak' de lady marry wit' you, you can mak' her wear any kin' clo'es you lak. De job ees to marry wit' her. De res' ees easy."

But Gilmore had his doubts.

When it came nearly time to separate, the halfbreed urged that he should be allowed to accompany Gilmore; but the latter would have none of it.

"She's no use a-talkin', Smoky," Gilmore said with finality. "I gotta go alone. It's a oneman job, this visit is. Tom Johnson knows yuh, don't he? Well, wouldn't he get suspicious a lot if you an' me came driftin' in together? Yuh bet he would. So yuh see I gotta go alone. No two ways about it!"

"I t'ink you weel be keel," was Nivette's doubtful comment.

"I won't be," laughed Gilmore. "I ain't a-goin' to die for quite a long

time yet. Got too much to do, I have, to go round dyin' just now. But speakin' o' that, how about you an' Virgin City? You can't go back there."

"Un why not?" Nivette wished to know. "I have de Winchestair, I have de six-shootair, I have de knife, un I have four five frien' een Virgin Ceety. I am all right. When you come, you weel fin' me dere waitin'."

"Here's where we separate, then. Ain't this the draw where I turn off to go to the Lazy D?"

"Dees ees eet. You have de leetle map I mak' safe?"

"Shore. So-long, Smoky!"

"So-long, Dal. Don't you keel nobody more'n you have to. Here, tak de fiel'-glass. You may need dem."

The draw was three miles in length. Gilmore rode out of the other end upon a wide flat, down the middle of which meandered a small river bordered by the eternal cottonwoods. This river was the War Ax, and despite many bends its general direction of flow was south.

According to Nivette's penciled map, the Triangle O ranch-house lay down-stream some forty miles. At a point beyond the Triangle O, thirty miles or more, the river ran between a saddle-backed hill and another shaped like a wickiup. Between forty and fifty miles west of these hills lay the Lazy D.

Gilmore made his unhurried way southward. Most of the time he kept the western rim of the valley between himself and the river. Twice he saw riders, but, seeing them first, he got under cover before they glimpsed him.

When the sun was near its setting, he knew by his map that he was

not far from the Triangle O ranch-house. He detoured widely and struck the river again ten miles to the south. Here he made a fireless camp and spent the night. At the first glow of dawn he was mounted and riding on.

An hour or two later he was moved to consult his map; but his prodding fingers could not find it in any pocket, nor was it in the saddle-bags or cantinas.

"I guess I remember it pretty well," he consoled himself, and urged his horse into a lope.

Now he rode with extreme caution; for Nivette had told him that the Lazy D men were worse than the Triangle O, and almost as bad as the V Up-and-Down, it being their pleasant habit to shoot first and seek an explanation later. This was the reason both for Nivette's desire to accompany him and for his own resolve to go alone. Gilmore knew that if he could reach Tom Johnson without being shot, and without being compelled to shoot, he would be safe enough. For he had concocted a story warranted to impress the most suspicious skeptic, and Tom Johnson was a person of small imagination. He had proved that by the memorandum and the I. O. U. on the ace of spades.

When Gilmore had traveled, as he judged, some thirty miles from the Triangle O, he rode in among low hills. He did not see the saddlebacked hill and the one shaped like a wickiup which flanked the ranch-house. Nevertheless, firm in the belief that his memory was not at fault, he forded the War Ax and headed steadily westward.

"I dunno, Frosty fellah," he said several hours later. "It don't seem like the Lazy D is croppin' up verv fast. It ain't possible that we overrode it, huh?"

The dun flapped his lower lip and swished a long tail when Gilmore leaned forward and rubbed him between the ears with his knuckles.

Wliung-g! Something hummed through the air where the rider's head had been before he bent forward. Gilmore did not straighten up. He stayed as he was, drove home the spurs, and poured the leather into the dun. That surprised animal, after one frantic leap, stretched himself out and ran like a scared coyote.

Seconds after the bullet passed over his head Gilmore heard the faint crack of the report. He looked over his shoulder. Nearly three quarters of a mile distant, above an outcrop on a hillside, a tiny gray smoke-puff was shredding away, and three riders were galloping down the slope toward him.

"Now, little fellah, we gotta ride!" Gilmore told the dun, and straightway became absorbed in the task of increasing his lead.

The three pursuers did not fire again. They confined themselves to riding. And they did ride. They even gained a little at first; but their horses could not go the pace with the dun.

At the end of half an hour Gilmore looked over his shoulder again. The men in the rear were beginning to drop back. He waved his hat derisively. Thut-t! A bullet ripped through the crown of the hat and another ricocheted off a rock near the dun's forefeet. Gilmore abruptly ceased waving his hat.

A hundred yards ahead he saw the entrance of a narrow draw. He jerked the horse into the draw, rode madly for a half-mile, and was brought up short; for a great spruce had fallen into the gully, blocking it completely.

The sides of the draw were extremely steep. In places they were

perpendicular. It was a tight pinch, especially tight in that three quickshooting gentlemen were hammering along in the rear.

Gilmore set his horse at the western side of the draw, and stood up in his stirrups. The bravehearted dun scrambled upward like a cat. Dirt and gravel flew from under his hoofs in showers.

He was almost at the top when his hind legs slipped and he slid to the bottom.

"Don'tcha care, fellah, don'tcha care!" bawled Gilmore. "Try her again! Come on now! Up yuh go!"

Scrambling, slipping, catching himself by a miracle, the horse strained up the steep. He hooked his forelegs over the top of the declivity, and there he stuck. Gilmore flung himself from the saddle, sank his heels into the earth between the horse's hoofs, and pulled on the bit for all he was worth.

With a grunt and a plunge the dun heaved himself up on level ground. Gilmore dragged him away from the edge, dropped the reins on the ground, and rushed back with his rifle to stem a possible charge. But the enemy was not charging that day. A quarter-mile away, when the dun made his supreme effort, the pursuers had recognized that the advantage had changed hands for the time being, and had turned back.

"They'll come round some other way," said Gilmore, running back to his horse. "Oh, shore they will, bless their little hearts, but when they do they won't find this orphan child. Come on, Frosty hoss, show these here hold-ups what a Noo Mexican cayuse can do when he just naturally spreads out his tail and travels!"

Frosty flattened his ears and settled down to his knitting. He galloped

straight toward the setting sun, and he kept up his stride till the sun set and the stars came out.

When he came to a tiny stream, Gilmore halted and made another fireless camp. His palate was beyond measure tired of cold bacon and cold water and dusty cracker-crumbs, but he dared not light a fire not in this unregenerate country.

When he had eaten sparingly, and was lying on his back smoking and listening to Frosty, as the pony energetically wrenched its dinner out of the bunch-grass, he felt a cold drop on his face. Then came another, and another, and several more all together added to the gaiety of the occasion.

"I knew she was beginnin' to cloud up," he muttered; "but I shore didn't think she was goin' to rain. Why, it hadn't ought to rain not now, in summer!"

But it was raining, and in fifteen minutes it was pouring. Gilmore, sitting cross-legged inside his slicker, remained where he was till it began to hail. Then he hastily saddled the frantic Frosty and rode away, drifting with the storm.

The hail ceased inside of thirty minutes, but the rain took it up harder than ever. The wind raved across the levels and swooped, yelling, in and out of the draws.

"This rain don't hit me where I live a-tall," observed Gilmore, when the water began to trickle down inside his collar. "I'd like it a lot if there was lightnin' or somethin'; but this here has a steady run to it that sounds promisin' for a week."

CHAPTER XII

GILMORE'S augury of a week of rain was incorrect; but the downpour lasted till the middle of the following morning, when it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The clouds blew away to the southwest, the sun came out, and Gilmore steamed in his wet clothes.

Leaving his horse in a cup-like pocket between two low hills, he climbed the taller height, sat down with his back braced against a boulder, and swept the landscape with his field-glasses. Miles away in the northwest, he saw a cluster of squat ranch-buildings.

"Can't be the Lazy D," he said. "I'm a longride west o' that now." Then something familiar about the position of the corrals in relation to the ranch-house struck him. "She's the Hash Knife! That's what she is the Hash Knife!"

He continued to stare through the glasses, his lips curving in a slow smile. It is not to be supposed that he saw merely the prosaic buildings of the ranch. Not at all! He saw Louise Stuart of the honey-colored hair and amber eyes.

"I wish she wouldn't wear pants," he mourned. "I bet she'd be a whizzer in skirts!"

From a hill that lay between him and the ranch a figure on horseback detached itself and moved slowly in his direction. The horse was a pinto with an all-white head.

"Seems to me," muttered Gilmore, "that Louise was ridin' a pinto like that the first time I met her. Now I come to think of it harder, I'm dead shore she was."

He crawled round behind his back-rest, lay down on his stomach, and poked the field-glasses past the edge. Horse and rider were

within a mile before Gilmore could be sure that the rider was a woman. At eight hundred yards' range he recognized Louise Stuart.

"If this ain't luck!" he breathed, ecstatically clicking his heels together. "Luck, whole herds o' luck! Say, she's a-goin' to get off. Yep an' she's got on a divided skirt!"

Mr. Gilmore's eyes opened saucer-wise. He stared with his mouth well ajar; but what followed was still more amazing than the divided skirt. Miss Stuart dismounted, knee-hobbled her pony, spread a slicker on the wet ground, and took a flat, oblong package from her saddle-bags. She sat down on the slicker, her feet under her, and undid the package.

"It's a lookin'-glass!" whispered Gilmore. "A lookin'-glass, an' she's a-stickin' it up in front of her against that rock. Now what's she doin'?"

He was not long kept in doubt. Unhurriedly Miss Stuart began to arrange her hair. When she had completed her coiffure, she examined it carefully from every angle, took it down, and started afresh. After the second attempt had been demolished, Gilmore closed his field-glasses and wriggled rearward.

Miss Stuart, having added the finishing touch to her fifth experiment by tying a baby -blue ribbon round her head, tilted her chin to contemplate the effect.

"That shore is pretty," a voice behind her drawled lazily.

Miss Stuart did not start. She merely rested her hands on her knees and slowly turned her head. Her narrowed amber eyes beheld Gilmore, his hat by his side, sitting within six feet of her. He nodded cheerfully to her, his white teeth flashing in a most disarming style.

"I always did like blue light blue like that," he announced. "It goes great against yore hair!"

She continued to regard him wordlessly.

"Ma'am, yuh could speak if yuh like," he continued. "Say howdy, or somethin', just to be sociable an' show there's no hard feelin's."

Miss Stuart smiled. Yet thereby she added nothing to the beauty of her face; for it was a decidedly unpleasant smile. In its intensity it was almost baleful.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I'm watchin' you, ma'am," was his calm rejoinder.

"Spy!" The most talented of actresses could not have injected more contempt into the word.

"Now, ma'am," he deprecated, "yuh know better. Honest, if yuh go on talkin' thataway, I'll begin to think yuh don't want me round."

"You are a spy! You know you are! You have come here to put innocent people in jail!"

"Innocent people! Why, ma'am, I never put an innocent man, woman, or child in jail in my life. You can gamble an' go the limit that if I wrap a calaboose round anybody, he'll deserve it all right. An' anyway, I ain't puttin' a soul in jail just now. You can see for yoreself I ain't."

"I sha'n't bandy words with you!"

"Don't bandy 'em, ma'am. It sounds queer, like bow-legs or somethin'. Try talkin' pleasant. It may come hard at first, but yuh'll get used to it after a while."

"Didn't you arrest Slim Dennison and Marshal Simms?"

"Shore!"

"Yet you have the face to say that you don't arrest innocent people!"

"I guess yuh ain't heard the right of that business," Gilmore observed dryly, and proceeded to enlighten her. "So yuh see what the Hash Knife boys heard in Virgin City an' Plain Edge ain't true," he added in conclusion.

"None of the Hash Knife boys have been to Virgin City, or Plain Edge, either, just lately," she declared. "It was a V Up-and-Down puncher that brought us the news."

Gilmore stared. The full significance of her words had struck him forcibly.

"Yuh say," he drawled, "that none of your boys have been to Virgin City or Plain Edge?"

"What of it?"

"Oh, no thin'. Only you warned me you were goin' to set 'em on my trail soon's they got back."

Her direct gaze shifted.

"I changed my mind," she told him a trifle nervously, he thought. "And if I did, it's my own affair. Think yourself lucky that I did."

"I do, ma'am, I do. I think I'm a mighty lucky fellah. Didn't yuh tell 'em anythin' about our little argument?"

"None of your business whether I did or not!" she returned furiously.

"No, ma'am, o' course it ain't. I was just wonderin'. It's natural for me to wonder 'bout what I don't understand. I can't help it. I'm obliged to yuh for thinkin' of me so much. Yuh remember I told yuh yuh would."

"You didn't! I haven't!" she stormed. "Think of you! A man that's mishandled me as you have! I hate you! I hate you! Do you understand?"

"I understand what you mean," he replied with an easy tolerance that was maddening. "But yuh don't hate me. Yuh couldn't hate me, ma'am. Why, yuh won't admit it, maybe, but you really feel right friendly to me. Shore yuh do!"

Louise Stuart was speechless. Her fingers tingled to box his ears. She was furious with him and with herself with him for tantalizing her to the verge of hysterical weeping, and with herself for losing control of her nerves. Habitually selfcontained, physically and mentally perfect, she had remained calm and collected under the stunning shock of hearing his voice over her shoulder, yet now she was forced to exert every jot of willpower to fight off the tears. The revelation of her own weakness frightened her.

He was speaking again in his lazy drawl.

"Yuh shore do look wonderful in a dress, ma'am. I wish yuh'd smile once!"

"You think you're very smart," she said unsteadily; "but you won't think so later on. How long do you imagine you'll keep those men prisoners?"

"Oh, some little time, some little time. Long enough, I guess."

"Not in Plain Edge/you won't."

"No, not in Plain Edge in Warrior's Mark. Yuh see, ma'am, when yuh said the whole county had taken sides, yuh'd forgot the Mark. It seems to be about the one place that's fairly neutral; so I took 'em there. They're there now. I don't think anybody'll get 'em away in a hurry."

"You'll see!"

"I'm always seem'. It's my business. Along with that I'll be seein' you again mighty soon."

"But not the way you think." Her smile was chilling.

"Hands up!" rapped out a harsh voice in Gilmore's ear.

Gilmore immediately elevated his arms. His soul writhed within him, but his eyes and mouth smiled at Miss Stuart.

"Yuh might have said somethin'," he reproached her.

"Lou," called the voice in his rear, "yuh might get the gentleman's gun."

Miss Stuart stretched out an arm and possessed herself of Gilmore's six-shooter. She also prodded him here and there in search of a hideout; but she overlooked the back of his neck, where the hilt of his bowie caressed the skin.

"He hasn't anything else," she announced, rising and moving a few yards to one side.

"Yuh can put yore hands down now," announced the voice, "an' yuh can get up an' turn round."

Gilmore obeyed. Twenty feet distant stood two men. The younger of the two was Louise's brother, Lanky, he of the Lucifer-like countenance. The other was a tall, fierce-eyed old citizen with a stubby white mustache. It was the latter individual who was holding up the deputy.

"Say, what was yuh cloin' here, Sis?" Lanky queried in a surprised tone, his eyes roving from the mirror on the ground to his sister's coiffure. "Prinkin', huh? Well, I'll be --"

"No cussin' in front of her, Lanky!" interrupted the old man. "How many times have I--"

"Well, look at her!" Lanky argued in selfdefense. "First she stops smokin', an' says it ain't womanly. Then she puts on dresses, an' now she comes cavortin' out here an' goes to prinkin' up her hair where nobody can see her; an' we follow her an' find her a-sittin' under a rock an' talkin' with this deputy. It might pay us to look into this!"

Gilmore's heart leaped at Lanky's words. He turned his head and deliberately winked at Miss Stuart. That young lady looked through him and bent down to pick up her looking-glass.

"You always were a good-natured fool, Lanky," she flung over her shoulder. "You'll be having me a spy next. Why don't you say right out that I had an engagement with this deputy right here on this spot?"

"I don't say that," grunted Lanky.

"Yuh'd better not, if yuh know what's good for yuh," came in ominous tones from the older man. "Yore sister has a right to act just as she pleases, an' I'll shorely admire to see any son of mine try to make her do different. Shut up! Not a yap out o' yuh! Where's yore boss, Mr. Deputy?"

"Hoss, boss!" repeated Gilmore in pained astonishment. "Yuh mean my boss?"

"Don't try to be funny. I mean yore boss."

"Oh, my boss! Shore, my boss, my little fourlegged cayuse. Poor HT fellah, he ran away just before you sports drifted in. It's shore a calamity, but it can't be helped."

He grinned cheerfully at his captor. The latter glared.

"Lanky," he said, "s'pose yuh ride round behind that hill an' see if the hoss ain't there!"

"I take it yo're Mr. Alec Stuart," hazarded Gilmore, when Lanky had gone.

The other nodded surlily.

"Don't be afraid to laugh," continued Gilmore. "I can see yuh ain't used to it, but try it once, anyway. It's good for the liver."

"Yo're the gent helped out my daughter an' me when Tom Johnson's boys jumped us over on Taylor's Ridge," old Stuart observed smilelessly. "I'm obliged to yuh for that, a heap obliged, but don't think for a minute it's goin' to be of much use to yuh. Yuh haven't no business here, none whatever. Yuh come here makin' trouble. We don't want no trouble. I guess there's only one way for us to keep out of trouble, an' that's by hangin' you."

"I wouldn't do that," cautioned Gilmore. "Yuh might regret it some time."

"I might, an' then again I mightn't. What for did yuh arrest Slim Dennison an' Tim Simms?"

Gilmore stretched his arms aloft and yawned.

"Yuh make me tired, old-timer," he observed. "I ain't got time to answer any questions special if I'm a-goin' to be stretched."

"I guess yuh'll be that!"

"Well, there's a tamarack over yonder a little ways. It looks like it ought to hold me up."

"Yuh won't be stretched to-day, nor yet maybe to-morrow; but by the day after it's likely yuh will be. Yuh see, my intention is to try yuh all fair an' square, an' to do that the V Up-an'- Down'll have to help. I'll do the right thing by yuh. It won't be no lynchin'. It'll be a reg'lar law-abidin' hangin'. I know yo're a deputy, but us citizens of Glenn County didn't ask yuh to come round here. We can 'tend to our own affairs, an' we will. Here comes Lanky leadin' a dun. I kind o' thought there'd be a boss cached behind that hill. Yuh gen' rally pack yore handcuffs in yore war-bags, don't yuh?"

CHAPTER XIII

IT is difficult to preserve an outward appearance of cheer when one's wrists are wearing handcuffs; yet Gilmore accomplished the feat. When he was not genially inquiring as to the number of cows rustled by Alec Stuart and his sportive offspring, he was whistling "The Rakes of Mallow" and other blithesome airs.

From his captors he obtained no satisfaction as he rode. The two men flanked him, the girl brought up the rear, and all three rode in solemn silence.

When they reached the Hash Knife, men came running from the

ranch-house, the corrals, and the bunk-house. They surrounded the little cavalcade, staring at Gilmore with extreme disfavor. Besides Louise's five other brothers, Gilmore counted sixteen punchers. Hard-looking folk, these sixteen, quite on a par, apparently, with the six Stuart boys.

Gilmore's serene blue eyes, resting casually on each in turn, ranged round the assemblage. Last he faced old Alec and smiled.

"Quite a crowd yuh've got," he drawled. "I wonder just how many will be leavin' us before the year's out!"

"You will, for one," was Stuart's pointed reminder.

"I'll do that, all right, but not the way yuh think. Somehow, old-timer, I can't see myself bein' stretched. In the first place, it wouldn't be comfortable; in the second place, I'm too busy; an' in the third, I aim to be some'eres else when the happy event takes place. An' to make the affair a success I'd have to be here. I'm sorry to disappoint yuh, but yuh see how it is."

"I see," 'Stuart nodded, "an' so will you!"

"I always do. Done it since I first opened my eyes. Do yuh aim to keep me here all day, or do I get somethin' to eat? Last time I was invited to rest my hat I got fed, an' fed plenty. Just now I could eat a raw dog."

"Yuh'll be fed an' watered," replied Stuart. "Tom, you an' Bob take all the tools out o' the blacksmith-shop. We'll keep him in there till Jack an' his outfit get here. Bill, yuh better caper over to the V Up-an'-Down quick an' right away, an' bring 'em back with yuh."

The men receiving the orders started to execute them without delay. They did not even look over their shoulders as they went. It was only

too evident that old Alec's word was law at the Hash Knife.

Gilmore's heart did not slow a beat. To be cast down in the face of defeat had never been his habit; and in this, probably the tightest corner of his career, he was more sunnily flippant than usual. He ate his dinner with a good appetite, and topped the meal with two pieces of pie and three cups of coffee.

"Yuh gotta eat in my business," he observed to the slim youngster with the broken nose, who was guarding him. "Caperin' round after you lawbreakers is one sure cure for dyspepsy!"

"Yore ailments won't bother yuh none after a while," the other smiled back.

"You, too? An' I did have hopes for you. Yuh look right sensible, not to say almost human. So yuh think the way yore old man does, do yuh? Well, well, ain't that just too curious? Gimme a match, will yuh?"

Dinner over, they put him in the blacksmithshop, and effectively jammed the door by leaning a crowbar bracewise under the latch.

"Jack Shaw'll be over here to-morrow, so yuh won't have long to wait," were Bob Stuart's parting words bawled through the crack.

"Yuh'll have to fetch him quicker'n that if yuh want me to see him," Gilmore flashed back.

A taunting laugh, and Bob was gone.

There were no windows in the shop, but Gilmore, stumbling in the darkness, found a seat on a nail-keg by the simple expedient of falling over it. After many efforts for they had handcuffed him as soon as he had eaten he contrived to reach a long forefinger down into the off pocket of his chaps. He poked about beneath two extra bags of

tobacco for a space, then withdrew the finger with an exclamation of deepest satisfaction.

"Fine an' dandy!" he muttered. "Father an' his little helpers'll shore wish they'd gone through me with a fine-tooth comb before putting me in here!"

He laughed silently, and proceeded to laboriously construct and light a cigarette an operation rather badly impeded by the handcuffs.

When his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he moved slowly around the four walls and took stock of his surroundings. The little shop was a solidly-constructed building of squared logs, with a floor of beaten earth. At one side was the forge of adobe, beside it was the watertub, opposite were several wagon-wheels, a small pile of horseshoes, and, in the middle of the floor, the nail-keg on which he had been sitting. There was nothing else. Certainly there was nothing that he could use as a weapon, but he found near the forge, half-buried in dirt, a stick with a charred end that had evidently seen service as a poker.

"Just what I needed!" he breathed delightedly, and carefully covered the stick with more dirt.

He smoked another cigarette, then lay down in the cleanest place he could find and went to sleep.

A light in his eyes awakened him. He blinked and sat up. The light came from the rays of the setting sun shining through the open doorway. In the opening stood Louise Stuart.

Gilmore struggled to his feet. He nodded approvingly.

"I shore like yore clo'es," he observed. :< That there blue dress looks

awful good on yuh. Yo're still wearin' that ribbon, too. Keep right on a-doin' it. Honest, yuh look like somethin' that's almost too good to be true. Like a angel, I mean!"

"This is no time to pass compliments," she said sharply, coming forward. "You don't seem to realize that you have got yourself into a serious situation. To put it bluntly, you may not see the sun set to-morrow evening."

"Well, now, I'd be right sorry not to. I like sunsets, don't you all red an' yaller an' goldygreen?"

Frank impatience was patent in her amber eyes. She struck her palms together.

"Stop joking! I have a proposition to make to you."

"Now, that's what I call talking. Take a chair, ma'am I mean, take a nail-keg. I'll stand in front so's the sun won't hit yuh in the eyes."

"You needn't trouble yourself. Stand still, can't you? How can I talk connectedly with you strolling about like a lost calf?"

"All right, ma'am, I'm stiller'n a fence-post. Watch me!"

She gazed up at him, and he wondered how it would feel to run his fingers through her hair.

"It looks just like silk," he said aloud.

"What looks oh! Don't you think it's the least bit rude to comment upon a girl in her presence?"

"I should say not," he replied, shaking his dark head. "No, sir, not when the lady's as gooclookin' as you are. I can't help talkin' about

yuh when yo're round. Yo're wonderful!"

Obviously startled, she bit her lip. The slow red colored cheeks and chin.

"Yo're prettier right now than any sunset that ever was," pronounced the appreciative Gilmore.

"Please don't," she entreated earnestly. "I--I wish you wouldn't not now. Just listen, do! My father says that if you will free Dennison and Simms, and give him your word to resign your office and to leave Glenn County at once, he will let you go. Otherwise--"

"I'll be lynched," he finished the sentence for her.

She nodded, her face suddenly going white.

"Why didn't yore dad tell me this himself?" he questioned.

"I don't know. I--"

"Yes, yuh do know. He had you bring his message because he thought yuh'd have some influence with me now, didn't he?"

To this brutally direct attack she made no reply. She averted her head. There was a catch in her breath. Suddenly she sprang up, her lithe figure tense, her eyes glistening.

"It isn't fair!" she cried. "I told them you wouldn't do what they wanted! I knew you wouldn't! And they'll hang you!"

The blood pounded in Gilmore's throat. His whole being had a curious sense of lightness. Louise Stuart was taking his part! She sympathized with him! He walked to her and patted her clumsily on the shoulder.

"Don't you care," he comforted. "I ain't hung yet. Another thing, how do yuh know I won't take yore dad up?"

She faced him with hot cheeks.

"I know you," she said simply. "You wouldn't do it. The man who had the nerve to pull a gun on Lanky when he had four of his brothers with him, and who went against my derringer and took it away from me, isn't the man to reneg now."

It was his turn to redden. His heart sang within him. Louise Stuart was actually praising him. He knew that he was greatly favored of men. Opportunity knocked. He grasped opportunity and Miss Stuart's hand.

"Girl dear," he whispered, "I shore love yuh a lot! I--"

She tore her hand away and fled. Gilmore, feeling a trifle dizzy, sat down on the nail-keg. The door was open, but he made no attempt to leave his prison. He stared down at the dirty floor, a little smile on his lips.

Five minutes later Miss Stuart returned. She came no farther than the doorway. He perceived that she was breathing hard. Standing there with downcast eyes, she wet her lips several times before she spoke.

"Wha what shall I tell my father?"

"Why, I thought yuh knew all about what to tell him."

Without another word, she closed the door, leaned the crowbar under the latch, and went away.

Gilmore, grinning widely into the darkness, teetered on his nail-keg. He was still grinning, still teetering, when the door of the shop was reopened a few minutes later, and Bob, the broken-nosed youngster, brought in his supper.

"It's a wonder you chunkers wouldn't let a fellah eat in the house," grumbled Gilmore. "I ain't partic'lar who I eat with rustlers, hossthieves, road-agents, they all look alike to me when it comes to eatin'. Can't spoil my appetite!"

"You shut up!" snarled Bob.

"My, my, what a temper we're in! What's happened to ruffle up Bobby boy's little pink feelings? Did it lose its rattle, or did one of its brothers steal its nursin'-bottle?"

"Dam' yore soul, yuh lousy deputy! Shut up!" bellowed Bobby, slamming the supper down on the forge.

"There now, see what yuh did! Yuh've busted that coffee-cup. Naughty, naughty!"

Bob flung back to the door in a rage, just as his sister came round the corner of the blacksmith-shop.

"Go to the house and get another cup of coffee," she ordered quietly.

"Get it yourself!" was the counter of the amiable Bob.

Louise moved closer to her brother. With narrowed eyes she stared at him till his gaze shifted.

"Do as I say," was her low-voiced command.

Bob departed in the direction of the house. Gilmore, affecting not to

observe the family jar, was slowly eating his supper. Wordless, Louise stepped past him, gathered up the pieces of the broken cup, and tossed them into a corner. Sfie went back to the doorway and stood leaning against the jamb. When Bob returned, she took the fresh cup from him and brought it in to Gilmore.

"You like it sweet, don't you?" she said. "If Sing Fah didn't put in enough sugar, I'll send Bob back."

But the coffee was just right, and Louise resumed her place in the doorway. The disgruntled Bob, squatting on his heels a few yards distant, sullenly refrained from looking at her or speaking.

Suddenly old Alec strode through the doorway. He nodded briefly to Gilmore and shoved his hat back from his forehead.

"My daughter says you can't see my proposition none," he cast at a venture.

"Not one little bit," declared Gilmore. "I don't wear a star just to take it off whenever the first man who comes along tells me to. Yought to know that."

"Now don't be a fool," argued Stuart. "I don't want to have to hang yuh. I'd a heap rather turn yuh loose. It'll save a lot o' trouble all round."

"Look here! S'pose you were in my place, would you do it?"

"Shore I would, instantler!"

"Yo're a liar, an' yuh know it!"

Stuart scratched his head reflectively.

"Well maybe I am," he admitted; "but--"

"Then why talk about it?"

"Aw, leave the idjit alone!" Bob put in from the doorway. "Yuh can't teach a mule sense!"

"But I can teach young fellers when to keep quiet!" flared his father.

Bob subsided.

Old Alec turned again to Gilmore.

"Can't yuh see what a lot o' trouble you'll save by doin' what I want? All yuh gotta do--"

"All I gotta do is quit bein' a man," drawled Gilmore over the edge of the coffee-cup.

"But--"

"Yo're millin', old-timer. Yuh want to get bedded down for the night."

Stuart pulled his hat forward, wheeled, and went out. Gilmore finished his meal in silence.

"Don't lose heart," Louise whispered to him, as she gathered up the few dishes. "Be ready for whatever may happen!"

The ubiquitous Bob entering at that moment, Gilmore did not dare open his mouth to question her. When she had gone out into the twilight, the door was closed and Gilmore was left sitting on his nail-keg in the darkness. But he did not mind not in the least! He dreamed a waking dream in which amber eyes and honey-colored hair were the most prominent objects.

CHAPTER XIV

TIME passed, as is its habit, but as there was no light by which to look at a watch, Gilmore was at a loss to tell the hour. He went to the door, knelt down, and put his ear to the crack at the bottom. He heard nothing at first save the rush of the wind, which had risen since the sun set. Within a minute or two, however, the sound of dragging footsteps struck his ear-drums.

The slow-moving feet shuffled past. Quickly the sound of them was smothered in the gallop of the wind. Gilmore waited, his ear at the crack. He soon discovered that at regular intervals the slow feet passed the door.

"He'll get tired o' that merry-go-round," Gilmore told himself. "I'll wait till he settles down."

No doubt the man did grow weary of his sentry-go, but he varied the monotony in a manner totally unexpected by Gilmore. He stopped at the door and kicked away the crowbar. Gilmore had barely time to scramble across the shop and flop down near the wagon-wheels when the door opened and a lantern was flashed inside.

To all appearances the prisoner was sleeping peacefully. The lantern was withdrawn, the door was shut, and the crowbar replaced. Gilmore sat up.

"Guess it's safe enough now," he whispered, and forthwith groped beneath the tobacco-bags in the off pocket of his chaps.

He found the object of which he had made sure when he was locked up, and pulled it out. It was a handcuff-key. Putting the handle between his teeth, he bent his head and inserted the key in one of

the locks. The cuff opened hard, but he managed it, almost losing two teeth in the process. With one hand free, it was no trick at all to unlock the other cuff.

"I wonder they didn't know cuffs come with two keys!" he grinned. "Good thing I hid out that extra key well, I guess yes!"

He swung his arms and stretched luxuriously. It was good to be rid of the clinking steel bracelets. He drew out the charred wooden poker from its pile of dirt beside the forge, and catfooted to the door.

When the sound of the sentry's footsteps had died away around the corner of the building, Gilmore shoved his stick through the crack and felt about for the crowbar. When he found where the end was stuck in the earth, he adjusted his stick beneath it and waited a few seconds.

Judging that his guard was crossing at the back of the building, Gilmore shoved the end of the crowbar free, but no more than free. Jumping to his feet, he tried the latch. The door moved. He opened it gently.

His heart almost stood still as the crowbar began to slide along the ground. Quickly he thrust his arm past the edge of the door, and seized the crowbar before it could fall. Then he pushed the door open, slid through, and quietly closed it. He laid down the crowbar, and, muffling the handcuffs with his handkerchief, tiptoed along the front of the shop. At the corner he halted and raised his right hand the one holding the handcuffs above his head.

The slouching sentry turned the corner. Gilmore's arm came down, and the handcuffs struck heavily upon the man's skull. He crumpled forward soundlessly. Gilmore flung an arm round his shoulders and eased him to the ground. Expertly the escaping prisoner divested

him of his cartridge-belt and six-shooter, and strapped the belt round his own waist.

The night was cloudy, and features could not be distinguished; but Gilmore breathed an earnest hope that the man he had struck was Lanky, as he turned him over on his back and snapped the handcuffs on his wrists. Next he gagged the senseless guard with his own neckerchief, grasped him by the ankles, and dragged him into the blacksmith-shop. He closed the door, replaced the crowbar under the latch, and was on the point of starting for the corrals when he perceived a moving figure between him and the ranch-house. Hastily he dodged round the corner of the building.

He crouched down and peered cautiously over the protruding butt of the foundation log. What he saw was sufficiently amazing.

A dark figure ran up to the door of the blacksmith-shop, wrenched away the crowbar, and opened the door. In a loud whisper a voice began calling:

"Mr. Gilmore! Mr. Gilmore, where are you?"

Gilmore arose and hurried forward.

"Here I am," he said.

With a little cry the figure turned.

"How did you get free?" whispered Louise Stuart.

"Unlocked my handcuffs an' knocked the guard on the head," he explained. "Yuh see, they overlooked my extra key."

"It's just as well they did. I didn't know about the guard. I thought I'd just have to let you out. Where did you put him?"

"In the shop."

He flicked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Let him stay there," she said with superb unconcern. "Your horse," she continued, speaking rapidly, "is tied outside the little corral. Your rifle is in its holster, and your belt and sixshooter are hung on the horn. Come, I'll take you!"

She grasped his wrist and ran with him to the little corral.

"What'll they do to you?" he queried, untying his horse.

"They won't do anything to me," she replied impatiently. "I'd like to see them I would indeed! Hurry, can't you?"

"Yuh've shore got lots o' nerve, ma'am," he declared. "Do yuh remember what I said a while back?"

"I d-d-don't know what you mean."

Try as she might, she could not keep her voice steady. She would have fled, but he was holding her hand too firmly.

"Yes, yuh do. Yuh remember I said I loved yuh a lot. I do more'n yuh think. I've loved yuh ever since that day when I piled yuh, not knowin' yuh were a girl. Some day I'm a-goin to come back an' marry yuh."

Oddly enough, she could not find a word to say. She, Louise Stuart, who had prided herself on having no feminine weakness, who had told this man that she hated him, was trembling all over.

"Girl, yo're the most wonderful thing God ever made!" the low voice went on. "Yo're the one I've been a-huntin' for all my life. Will yuh wait

for me?"

He was drawing her toward him. His other hand was on her shoulder. She braced her body backward.

"D-don't!" she begged shakily. "Not now! I-I don't want you to!"

Instantly he released her.

"Yuh'll never have to do anythin' yuh don't want to, not with me," he told her. He took her hand, stooped, and kissed her smooth, white wrist. "I ain't forgettin' what yuh've done for me," he said quietly. "I'll be back!"

He mounted and rode away. The girl's eyes followed his going long after he had disappeared. Slowly and very thoughtfully she turned away, went back to the ranch-house, and let herself in.

CHAPTER XV

A WEEK later Gilmore, his face covered with nine days' growth of stubble, rode in among the buildings of the Lazy D ranch. Only the cook was about, for the morning was yet early in the making.

Gilmore unsaddled the dun, turned him into the nearest corral, and walked calmly to the kitchen, where, in the doorway, the cook stood staring, amazement written large on his features.

"Mornin'!" was the deputy's brief greeting, as he seated himself on the cook's private chair beside the door.

"Who might yuh be, a-makin' so free?" the cook wished to know.

Gilmore's peculiar smile flashed at full power on the cook.

"I might be 'most anythin', but I am a, stranger in a strange land, sort of a pilgrim o' the night. Anythin' else yuh'd like to know 'bout what's none o' yore business?"

The cook would have liked to know a great deal more; but there was something daunting about the stranger's smile, and the stranger's eyes, for all their careless merriness, were not the eyes of one with whom it would be safe to presume. The cook was wise in his generation. He returned to his pots and pans.

Gilmore, when he had smoked a cigarette, lounged into the doorway.

"Say, cookie," he said, "how's chances here for gettin' a job?"

Something concisely impolite was on the tip of the cook's tongue, but he choked down the words.

"I dunno," he replied, painfully civil. "Yuh'll have to see Tom Johnson."

"I'll have some coffee while I'm waitin'," observed Gilmore, holding out a tin cup.

To the cook's intense surprise, he found himself filling the stranger's cup. And the cook was one who never fed hungry people at odd times.

"Good coffee!" remarked Gilmore, following the first sip. "Yo're a reg'lar cook!"

Heavily silent, the cook continued to prepare breakfast.

Ten minutes later Tom Johnson, issuing from the ranch-house in response to the announcement of breakfast, thumped by the cook upon a dishpan, perceived a stranger sitting by the kitchen door. A stranger? Tom Johnson almost rubbed his unbelieving eyes. Then he

walked quickly toward the man. The latter met him half-way.

"Howdy?" said Gilmore, his cool eyes appraising the other. "I want a job."

Tom Johnson, a lean individual with a cleanshaven, saturnine countenance, whistled softly through his thin lips as he surveyed Gilmore. There was meanness in Johnson's slightly protruding upper lip, selfishness in his small, flat ears, and cunning malice in his close-set, mudbrown eyes.

"That's a right good tune yo're makin' a hash of," observed Gilmore. "Why don't yuh whistle it right?"

With the greatest good nature in the world Gilmore proceeded to make clear his point by whistling the air correctly. Tom Johnson's eyes narrowed.

"Stranger, who are yuh?" was his harsh question.

"Yuh can call me Gill, if yuh don't do it too frequent Dan Gill, if yo're partic'lar."

"What do yuh want?"

"I told yuh I wanted a job. I want one bad. An' just to make it plainer, yuh need me bad. I can outshoot, outride, an' outrope any gent on the place, bar none. I'll be one welcome addition to yore happy family, an' don't yuh forget it."

"Yo're modest!"

"Yuh've noticed it?" chuckled Gilmore. "It's where I live, modesty is."

"Are yuh as good with a Winchester as y'are with yore tongue?"

"I told yuh I could outshoot any sharp on the ranch, didn't I? That goes for rifle an' sixshooter both. An' I'm a ring-tailed whizzer on the draw. Yuh didn't know it, did yuh, but my gun's been coverin' yore belt-buckle for the last minute!"

Tom Johnson looked down. It was true. The long barrel of a six-shooter pointed unwaveringly at his stomach. He smiled wryly. Then he blinked his eyes; for the six-shooter was no longer pointing at his stomach. It was back in the holster hanging low along the musical demonstrator's right leg. Yet, in Tom Johnson's sight, there had been no perceptible movement.

"There'd ought to be an openin' 'most anywhere for a feller with yore nerve, Gill," vouchsafed Tom Johnson. "Yo're new to this country, I take it?"

"I am to Glenn County."

"Come far?"

"Some might call it far, but I like to travel."

"Figurin' on goin' back soon?"

"Not right soon," was the cautious reply.

"Come on an' eat," said Johnson, and headed for the bunk-house.

There were only ten men at the ranch, Gilmore found. The other thirty were out on the range and at the line camps. There was a lot of work to do on the range work not strictly confined to the raising of cattle for the market. In short, the Hash Knife and the V Up-and-Down were rustling the Lazy D cows. Tom Johnson mentioned these matters to Gilmore in the office after breakfast.

"Why, only a couple o' days ago," stated the manager, "three o' my boys cut down on one o' the Hash Knife or V Up-an'-Down gents over west a ways. They chased him, but he made it. Had a good hoss, a dun, they said."

"Shore, duns are tough," Gilmore concurred smoothly. "Got one myself. Are these here Hash Knife fellahs regarded hard?"

"They're all that. An' there's another sharp yuh gotta look out for a gent named Gilmore. A new deputy he is, an' for a wonder he's honest, they say. He arrested Dennison, o' the V Upan'-Down, an' Tim Simms, the marshal o' Virgin City, an' took 'em north. I ain't got no use for either o' 'em, so I'm glad it had to happen; but this Gilmore'd just as soon arrest you or anybody who didn't ride to suit him. O' course, he'll cash sooner or later. If he crosses my trail, he shore will; but anyway yuh better watch out for him while yo're cavortin' round."

"I never was in a cattle war before," said the other hesitatingly.

"What's a matter, Gill? Idea make yuh nervous?"

"I guess yuh don't mean that," drawled Gilmore, his smile very much in evidence.

"I guess I don't. Whatever yuh are, y'ain't afraid. Now look here, I got a job for yuh. Yo're bein' a stranger makes it easy. I thought of it soon's yuh said yuh were new to Glenn County. What'll yuh take to hire out to the Hash Knife an' kill old Alec Stuart the first chance yuh get?"

"Five hundred dollars," Gilmore replied promptly.

"Too much! Give you two fifty."

"Say, whadda yuh think I am?" demanded the indignant Gilmore. "My life is worth a sight more to me than a measly five hundred dollars, but I'm willin' to risk it for that, an' not a cent less."

"Say three hundred. I ain't made o' money, man! I can't stick my hand in my pocket an' haul out double eagles whenever I feel like it."

"No? Now yuh listen to me. Yuh'll haul out twenty-five double eagles before I'll attend to the job, an' that goes. If yuh like, I'll take Jack Shaw, o' the V Up-an'-Down, at the same price. Come a-runnin'! Bargains in assorted killin's! Murders while yuh wait Dan Gill, proprietor. There y'are!"

"What do yuh know o' Jack Shaw?"

Johnson's eyes were snakily suspicious.

"None o' yore business what I know o' Jack Shaw," replied the truculent Gilmore. "Just because I work for yuh don't give yuh license to go buttin' in askin' fancy questions."

"Y'ain't workin' for me yet."

"No, but I will be soon. Y'ain't got a sport in yore outfit to turn this trick for yuh. There ain't another card in the pack but yores truly. Yuh gotta take me see?"

"Oh, I dunno 'bout that!"

"What's surprisin' to me," Gilmore pursued unheeding, "is that yuh ain't downed those two jiggers before this. She looks like a short hoss to curry, but it ain't been done. Folks is shore unenterprisin' round here!"

"Yo're sure makin' me vore friend for life," Tom Johnson remarked

with caustic sarcasm.

"I expect," was the serene reply. "While we're talkin' so friendly o' sudden death, ain't there some other gent you'd like pushed off the map? I ain't partic'lar at all."

"Yes, there is," Tom Johnson admitted. "How'd yuh like to go to Texas?"

"Not me! I've been there. I don't like Texas, not nohow."

"Yuh'd be paid well, o' course. If yuh beef them two thieves, Stuart an' Shaw, I want yuh to go down to Texas an' down a feller named John Drummond."

"Any address?"

"Shore the Double D ranch, about forty mile east o' El Paso."

"What is he punch, foreman, manager?"

"He's the owner."

"Owner, huh? John Drummond! Seems to me I heard how a John Drummond owned this ranch."

"He does, but I guess the John Drummond yuh heard of was old John Drummond. He owned this ranch an' the one in Texas. He died 'bout three year ago in a El Paso hospital, and now his son owns both ranches."

"I shore see what you mean. Nothin' small about yuh, none whatever! If young John cashes, are yuh figurin' on glommin' onto the Texas ranch as well as this one?"

"None o' yore business!"

"I said that a while back to you. That goes; but yore business is my business while liT orphan Willy is doin' yore dirty work. Yessir, yuh gotta be nice to Willy, an' not keep him guessin'. Willy don't like to guess. It strains his brain. Now what was yuh goin' to say?"

"If John Drummond dies, I stand to win only the Lazy D out o' the deal," Tom Johnson declared sulkily.

"Only the Lazy D that's tough! Yuh deserve 'em both. I was hopin' yuh'd get more'n the Lazy D, so's I could charge yuh more. However, seein' as it's you, an' I like yore looks, I'll put yore Texas young fellah out o' the way for one thousand."

"Whadda yuh think I'm made of?" bawled Tom Johnson.

"Lord knows, but yuh look fairly human. Maybe y'are. Can't never tell. One thousand, I said."

A crafty gleam lit the manager's eye.

"Well, you don't expect to get your money in advance?"

"Not a simoleon! Cash on delivery is my motto. Yep, I know what's wrigglin' round inside yore roof. Yuh think that after I've done yore little job it'll be easy to snuff my light out, thereby savin' yuh money an' trouble. Don't believe it for a minute! Puttin' out my light is a heap likely to ruin the extinguisher. I'll collect from you, Mr. Johnson; an' while I'm workin' for yuh I draw reg'lar wages as a hand!"

"Aw, say--"

"Say it! Say it! Do I or don't I?"

"Yuh do! Yuh do! I dunno why I ever listened to yuh in the first place. I don't like yuh a little bit!"

"Yuh will 'fore yo're through. Everybody does. My takin' little ways are shore winnin'. Howdja like to hire a friend o' mine?"

"Is he like you?"

"He ain't so tall, but he's just about as wide, an' he can shoot with both hands. To tell yuh the truth, I'd kind o' like to have this fellah for a side-kicker."

"I thought yuh was aimin' to go it alone."

"I don't remember tellin' yuh how I was aimin' to go it. I want Jimmy. I gotta have him, or the deal's off."

"What did yuh say his name was?"

"Jimmy for now. He'll tell yuh the rest when he drifts in."

"I can use another gun-fighter. All right, get yore Jimmy. I'll pay his wages. How soon will he be here?"

"Week, maybe."

Tom Johnson nodded.

"I guess yore best plan'll be to hire out to old Alec first."

"Yore best plan'll be to leave me to do it my own way."

"Shore, shore, help yoreself!"

"I mean to. Don't fret or ask questions if I ain't always on hand. I may

be away a weektwo weeks at a time. I'll be busy, all right. Now, before I start in, there's one formality to go through I want yore promise to pay in writin'."

"Yuh won't get it!"

"Then I'll be leavin' yuh. So-long!"

Gilmore started toward the door.

"Aw, come on back," the other grunted. "I'll give yuh yore fool I. O. U."

"I kind o' hoped yuh'd see the light," grinned Gilmore.

"I've seen that sport some'eres, an' I'd shore admire to know where," mused Tom Johnson, when Gilmore had departed to look after his horse. "Gill... Dan Gill.. the name don't tell me no thin'. Burn his soul, if it wasn't I could use him I'd 'a' blown him apart for talkin' the way he did. But I'll fix that, Mr. Dan Gill, when yuh've done finished yore little jag o' work. Yuh shore talk too free to suit me!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE new hand fell easily into the ways of the Lazy D. The men accepted him without question. None essayed to try him out. Doubtless they had perceived what had been obvious to the cook and to Tom Johnson that Dan Gill was a good man to let alone.

Four days after his arrival, his facial stubble having assumed creditable proportions, Gilmore threw a saddle on the toughest of the string assigned to him and set out for Virgin City. He arrived late at night, and dismounted in front of the Ace Saloon. The windows were dark. He walked round to the back and beat upon the rear door.

"Whatcha want?" the voice of Tom, the bartender, growled through an open window.

"I want to speak to Mrs. Kyle."

"She don't wanna speak to nobody. If yuh want a drink, come round in the mornin'."

"Fellah, wake the lady up, an' do it pronto!"

Tom decided to obey. Mrs. Kyle pattered to the door.

"Who is it?" she inquired before lifting the bar.

"I'm from Warrior's Mark," Gilmore replied in meaning tones.

"Tom, you skip right back to bed," Gilmore heard the lady say. "This gentleman's a friend of mine."

The door opened, and Mrs. Kyle fairly hauled Gilmore within. By the light of an oil-lamp on a chair, he saw that the widow was fully dressed, that her eyes were red, and that her face beneath the tumbled mass of her hair was swollen with weeping. She managed a brave smile as she picked up the lamp.

"Come on in my room," she said. "We can talk there."

Once inside the Avails of her room, with the windows down and curtains drawn, the door locked, and a heavy blanket hug from jamb to jamb, she ran to Gilmore and clutched his sleeve.

"What did yuh come here for?" she exclaimed in a tense whisper. "Don't yuh know any better?"

"Nobody'll know me behind these whiskers," he said, smiling down

at her.

"Don't yuh fool yourself! I'd know yuh anywhere, whiskers or no whiskers, and I haven't the only sharp eyes in town. Jack Shaw and six of the V Up-and-Downers are here. You've got to get out before daylight!"

"Well, maybe I will," Gilmore said; "but I got a little business to do round here first. I gotta see Smoky, an' I gotta meet a friend. Any strangers sifted in lately?"

"One he's stayin' over at the hotel. Rode in two days ago."

"What sort of a lookin' fella is he?"

"Not so tall as you, about your weight, yellow hair, gray eyes. Looks young, but acts older."

"That's Jimmy he's a friend o' mine. Say, I ain't thanked yuh for sendin' Smoky with yore warnin'."

"Warnin' ? What warnin' ?"

"Why, that letter yuh sent by Smoky warnin' me there was a citizens' committee organizin' to trail me an' my prisoners."

"Oh, yes, of course, that letter. You're you're welcome. Don't mention it. What else could I have done? I'd do a lot more'n that to play even for my Sam. Even! I can never play even! But I can do something anyway. You're sure Dennison and the marshal can't escape?"

"Not if I have any luck at all. Don't worry; Slim will hang an' the marshal will get ten years more, if I can manage it."

Tight-lipped, she nodded and passed a hand across her eyes.

"You didn't come here to tell me the news. What can I do for you besides notifying Smoky and your friend?"

"I was comin' to that. Can yuh tell me anythin' about the Fort Henderson beef issues?"

"They had one fixed for yesterday. I guess they had it, all right. The government's regular enough."

"Bout how many cows do the Injuns get?"

"

"Averages two twenty or two thirty round there, anyway."

"Djuh know who has the contracts?"

"I don't know that. Is it important?"

"Kind of."

"I'll try an' find out."

"Don'tcha bother I'll find out. Where's Smoky live?"

"You stay here, and I'll send Tom for him. Want yore friend, too?"

"Might as well have 'em both. You send Tom, then, an' I'll throw my boss in vore corral."

When Jimmy and Smoky Nivette arrived in tow of Tom, Mrs. Kyle ushered them into her bedroom. When the door was blanketed, she sat down on the floor with her back against it.

Smoky was unfeignedly glad to see Gilmore. Jimmy greeted him

with a slow smile and a slower wink. He looked younger than his years, this Jimmy. Even his eyes were juvenile in their frank, almost wondering stare.

Both listened silently as Gilmore outlined his work of the past few days. When he held out for their inspection the ace of spades I. O. U., both laughed shortly. So did Gilmore, as he returned the precious bit of evidence to his inner vest-pocket.

"Now that we know Johnson wrote out Enright's I. O. U.," drawled Gilmore, "the next thing to do is find out what that number one hundred and ten stands for. Do yuh know the agent over at the Fort Henderson reservation, Smoky?"

"Shore, she ees one t'ief," was Smoky's succinct reply. "All tarn lie, lie to de Enjun. Some day Enjun she geet mad un geet hees hair, mabbeso."

"Do yuh know the Injuns, too?"

"Shore! Know dem well. Dem Enjun Piegan. I have Piegan woman once."

"I guess we'll take a pasear over to Fort Henderson. I know they had a beef issue yesterday."

"So that's it!" Jimmy murmured softly.

"That's it," said Dal Gilmore.

CHAPTER XVII

FORT HENDERSON was a cavalry post two hundred and fifty miles due east of Virgin City. A few miles beyond the post lay the

reservation. Most of the Indians, gorged to repletion with agency beef, and carrying their agency goods, had departed, but some thirty families still remained. The teepees flecked the flats beyond the agency buildings. The braves, resplendent in new blankets and much brass wire, stalked solemnly about, or reclined in silent groups and smoked, or sat in not so silent groups and gambled away what a benevolent government had so recently bestowed upon them.

Smoky, followed by Gilmore and Jimmy, rode in among the wickiups. Instantly an army of assorted curs broke upon them in a snarling wave. An ancient warrior sitting in front of a large teepee raised a seamy, scarred countenance and uttered a succession of harsh gutturals. A fat squaw and six naked children popped out of the teepee, dispersed the dogs with shrill outcries and well-directed pebbles, and popped in again.

The half-breed spoke briefly to the veteran and dismounted.

"Dees man she ees Walkin' Hoss hees niece was my; woman," he explained, and introduced his two friends.

Smoky after the long, carved pipe of red and polished pipe-stone had gone the rounds, began to talk rapid Piegan to Walking Horse. The old man listened intently. When the half-breed ceased speaking, the Indian called to the fat squaw and spoke at some length. The woman waddled away.

Within twenty minutes she was back. In her arms were two cowhides. They were wet, and smelled to heaven. She spread the unlovely things on the ground. One hide bore the A Upand-Down brand, the other Lazy H-in-a-Circle.

Gilmore and his friends smiled slightly; for the A Up-and-Down brand is an amazingly simple derivation of the V Up-and-Down. Any

gentleman wishing to make the change merely takes unto himself a hot iron and a wet blanket, crosses the open ends of the V's, and prolongs their sides.

Again, from the Hash Knife, by adding a semicircle across the top of the brand and connecting with vertical lines the two horizontal bars of what was formerly the handle of the knife, a passable Lazy H-in-a-Circle may be evolved. True, the circle will be rather more oval than round, but the wards of the nation are not given to quibbling about such trifles.

When the iron is expertly applied to a cow through the aforesaid medium of the wet blanket, the result is a wound that heals quickly and seldom sloughs, greatly to the owner's embarrassment and to the profit of the intelligent rustler.

"Slick!" observed Nivette, fingering the brand on one of the hides.

"Yo're shore whistlin'," grinned Jimmy.

"But yuh can see where she's been gone over," said Gilmore. "That Lazy H-in-a-Circle is shore a work of art!"

"'Tain't evidence enough," doubted Jimmy, then added hopefully: "I dunno as we need it, do we?"

"Oh, we gotta be legal," was Gilmore's virtuous rejoinder, accompanied by a quirk of the right eyebrow. "Smoky, ask Walkin' Hoss who delivered the cows, how many of 'em there were, and who had the contract."

Smoky turned to Walking Horse. The Indian's reply was not short. When the clicking gutturals ceased to flow, Smoky's face had lost some of its impassivity.

"Walkin' Hoss she say," announced the translator, "dat five men drive de cow two hunnerd un feefty cow one hunnerd ten Lazy H-een-a-Circle un de res' A Up-un-Down. She say de foreman o' de outfeet was name' Brown, Tom Brown, un she ees de one have de contract. Dees Tom Brown she good frien' wit' de agent. By gar, I t'ink dees Tom Brown she ees all same bruddair wit' Sam Jone' un John Smeet'. Walkin' Hoss she see dees man many tarn, un she describe heem varree good, un by gar, Tom Brown ees look lak Deeck En right!"

"I kind o' expected he would," drawled Gilmore. "Let's go up an' say howdy to the agent."

The Indian agent received them in his office. His name was Oyle, and it fitted, for his aspect was oily and his greeting oilier.

"How's chances for a beef contract?" queried Gilmore, after introducing himself as one Riley, of Beardance.

"What price?" countered the agent, tenderly patting his pomaded brown hair.

"The usual, I guess twenty-two dollars a head, an' the contract made out at twenty-five."

Oyle raised scandalized hands.

"My dear sir, this is corruption. I cannot listen to you. I must ask you to leave at once!"

"Shore, but would yuh listen if I made it twenty? Oh, yuh don't have to put on yore holy look with us. Dick Enright sent us to yuh. We're all friends together, an' yuh bet we understand each other. Don't make any mistake about that!"

"For whom are you acting?" Oyle asked with a keen look.

"Myself ourselves, I mean."

"What is your brand?"

"Don't fret about any brand. It won't hurt the flavor o' the beef. But I was askin' yuh if I made it twenty dollars how about it?"

"But you are so brutally direct!" protested the agent. "However, since Dick Enright sent you, we'll say no more about it. Positively, though, I couldn't consider any offer of more than eighteen. Say eighteen, and the contract for twenty-five."

"Say nineteen, and the contract for twentyfive."

"Eighteen fifty!"

"Nineteen. Why, at that yo're makin' fifteen hundred dollars! What more do yuh want?"

"You know very well that they can be bought in the open market at fifteen. Eighteen fifty is generous more than generous, I may say."

"Yuh may say all yuh please, but yo're not buyin' these here cows in the open market. Yo're buyin' from gents who are givin' yuh a chance to make fifteen hundred dollars out of good old easy Uncle Samuel. The chance is worth somethin'. Fifteen hundred, I said. That fixes her at nineteen, which goes as it lays."

"Nineteen it is, then. Hand in your bid any time this month, and I'll attend to it myself. After all, what's the difference? Have a little drink?"

"We ain't drinkin'," said Gilmore shortly. "Who's this a-comin',"

Smoky?" he added, as two ponies clattered up to the door.

Smoky, who was nearest to the window, glanced out. Immediately he went after his gun.

"She ees ol' Stuart un Jack Shaw!" he exclaimed in a loud whisper.

"No gun-play!" cautioned Gilmore.

Jimmy's hand rested on the butt of his sixshooter, but he did not offer to pull the weapon.

Gilmore sauntered to the doorway. Old Alec and Shaw were sitting in their saddles, staring with narrowed eyes at Gilmore's horse.

"What's a Lazy D boss doin' here?" Jack Shaw was saying.

"I rode him here," explained Gilmore from the doorway. "Nice day, ain't it?"

The two whirled in their saddles, their right hands dropping.

"Now, now, none o' that!" expostulated Gilmore, flinging out his hands. "I could 'a' drilled both o' yuh from where I stood behind yuh, an' I didn't. Yessir, passed up one thousand wagonwheels just like they were nothin' at all. Don't yuh know me? Shore, this is me, the original Gilmore, behind the whiskers. Come on in! Nobody wants to hurt yuh."

Old Alec and Jack Shaw looked at each other. Stuart's white mustache fairly bristled with suspicion. Shaw's thin lips parted, revealing sharp white teeth. Gilmore saw the V Up-and-Downer's heavy shoulder-muscle lift and twitch under the blue flannel shirt, and believed that he had lost. To refrain from going after his gun in a desperate attempt to beat the others to the draw required all of his

will-power; but neither his eyes nor his smile faltered for an instant.

Slowly Shaw's hand fell away from the butt of his gun. Stuart's followed suit. The two men dismounted and tied their horses.

Gilmore turned back into the room and whispered to Smoky. The half-breed walked out, mounted his horse, and rode away in the direction of the Indian camp. In passing he had favored Stuart and Shaw with a malevolently contemptuous grin. When the two entered the room it was apparent that they were far from being at ease.

"What's the breed goin' away for?" demanded Stuart. "I tell yuh flat, if there's any razzle-dazzlin', yuh get my first bullet, Gilmore!"

"Keep yore shirt on," requested Gilmore. "Yo're safe as a baby in a cradle."

"Yuh needn't think yore bein' on the reservation'll help yuh any," growled Shaw with a venomous stare. "I'm watchin' yuh, young feller!"

"Don't strain yore eyes," Gilmore advised cheerfully. "I tell yuh, no harm's meant by yuh at all. If yuh think yuh need protection, ask Mr. Gyle for it. He'll be glad to help y' out."

But Mr. Oyle was not thinking of helping anybody out at that moment. His chief concern was for his precious self. The last two persons in the world whom he wished to see were Stuart and Shaw. In his agitation he even failed to remark that while the deputy had introduced himself as Riley, of Beardance, Stuart had addressed him as Gilmore.

"How did yore lynchin'-bee pan out, Mr. Stuart?" Gilmore asked. "I hope Mr. Shaw got there in time."

"Yuh better keep off my range!" Stuart cried angrily.

"F I catch yuh on mine there won't be no trial," Shaw stated earnestly.

"Now that's right unfriendly. I tell yuh, it's a dog's life bein' a deputy!"

"A deputy?" shouted the agent.

"Why, yes," said Gilmore. "I guess I must 'a' forgot to tell yuh. But don't let me keep yuh from attendin' to these two gents. I don't mind waitin' a bit."

"We come about them last bids of ours, Mr. Oyle," Stuart remarked ominously. "We don't understand why they was refused. We always got the contracts up to a year an' a half ago--never had no trouble; but since then we've been beat out reg'lar. Last month well, yuh know what our terms was. They was cut, an' we want to know who cut 'em. An' yuh can gamble yore best dollar, Oyle, that we're goin' to find out who was the sharp who was low card, an' just how low that card was!"

Gilmore and Jimmy burst into loud roars of laughter. They whooped and stamped upon the floor and beat each other upon the shoulderblades. They wiped away the tears and went off into fresh paroxysms. Smoky Nivette, entering upon the scene with two smelly cowhides under his arm, discovered them clinging to each other and chortling weakly.

By a great effort Gilmore regained command of his faculties. He took the hides from Smoky, and opened them on the floor in front of the agent's desk. Pointing to the brands, Gilmore turned to the wondering Stuart and Shaw.

"Yuh see that A Up-and-Down an' that Lazy H-in-a-Circle," said he. "They're right handsome brands, but they don't belong to this

Territory. One o' 'em's a Texas brand, an' the other's New Mexico. They was one hundred an' ten Lazy H-in-a-Circle an' one forty A Up-and- Down in the last issue on this reservation. It might be interestin' to know how they got here. If you two fellahs will scrouge down on yore hunkers an' look close at those two brands, yuh can easy see how they got here, an' yuh won't need any microscope, either!"

There was a crash of splintering glass beyond the desk. Mr. Oyle was jumping through the window.

"Yuh see how 'tis," Gilmore observed significantly, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "An' if yore friend Enright was here, he'd be in just as much of a hurry as the agent."

"Enright!" Stuart gasped.

"Deputy Dick that's the baby; only they call him Tom Brown down here. I'm not askin' yuh to swallow it all at once. It's kind of a mouthful for yuh both, I know; but just gulp away, an' the first thing yuh do go ask old Walkin' Horse to tell yuh what the man who got the last contract looked like. What he says'll do yuh a heap o' good!"

Mr. Stuart and Mr. Shaw stamped outside and swung into their saddles.

"They just can't get to that camp fast enough!" Gilmore remarked.

"They'll be back," said Jimmy.

"Shore," Gilmore agreed. "They want to say good-by to the agent man; but I'll go yuh ten even that fellah won't be visible on the sky-line this side o' the fort inside a week."

"Yuh got a shore thing," grinned Jimmy.

When Stuart and Shaw returned to the agency they found Gilmore sitting alone on the door-sill. Nivette and Jimmy were leaning against a nearby freight-wagon. Jimmy was handling a Winchester, and asserting in loud tones that this particular rifle was the straightest-shooting weapon in the Territory.

"Agent's still out," announced Gilmore, smiling up at the two horsemen. "One o' the Injuns told me he saw him on a pony a-hittin' the trail for the fort. He's probably takin' tea with the commandant right now."

"Remember what I said about stayin' away from my ranch," Stuart warned heavily. "Yuh better not try to force trouble on me!"

"Why, I never thought o' such a thing as trouble with you," Gilmore declared; "but I gotta come to the ranch. I gotta come, I tell yuh. Yuh see, I'm goin' to marry yore daughter."

"Louise!"

"Ain't she the only daughter yuh got? Shore, Louise. Who else? An' say, please keep yore hands away from yore belts. My friend Jimmy is right behind yuh, an' he's got a liT gun, an' he's a-goin' to shoot the liT gun if he sees any funny motions about you two gents. Yessir, he said he would. I heard him!"

"Lemme tell yuh somethin', young feller," exclaimed Stuart. "Yo're walkin' mighty close to the fire!"

"Meanin'"

"If you've been tellin' any lies to Louise --"

"Now look here, father-in-law-to-be," interrupted Gilmore, "I don't mind yore callin' me names an' talkin' rough, 'cause yo're her father. I

don't mind it much. Still, I wouldn't be too brash, if I were you. I just wouldn't give my imagination free rein, like the poet fellah says."

"By" barked Jack Shaw.

"None of my remarks apply to you," Gilmore cut in frostily. "I tell yuh flat, I don't like yuh a little bit, an' any time yuh feel like startin' anythin', why, come a-runnin'. There ain't any fence to jump I'm right here!"

"Yuh can talk big when there's a gent with a rifle behind me," yapped Shaw.

"Jimmy," called Gilmore, "there's a close season on Mr. Shaw, so far as yo're concerned. Now, Mr. Shaw, my time is yores!"

"I ain't takin' no chances," grunted Shaw. "I'll meet yuh some other time, when there's just you an' me around."

"I'll try to be on hand when that time comes. Speak up, Mr. Stuart! I can see yo're sufferin' to say somethin'."

"So long's yo're a-goin' to marry my daughter so free," said Stuart, "yuh'll be glad to know that she's a-goin' to marry Mr. Shaw next month."

"He's a healthy-lookin' bridegroom!" observed Gilmore, who had not for a single instant ceased to keep both eyes on Shaw. "I'd shore hate to be you two when Miss Stuart hears the glad tidin's! But jokin' aside, yuh might remember what I said, father-in-law, about yore daughter. She's a-goin' to marry me, an' don't try any odd numbers tryin' to make her do different. If yuh do, I'll hear of it, an' you'll pay for it. That reminds me, Tom Johnson offered me five hundred dollars apiece for the scalps o' you fellahs. O' course, dad-to-be, yo're out of it, so long's yo're a good boy; but nothin' like that goes for Mr. Jack Shaw. An' five hundred dollars would go a long way toward buyin'

pots an' pans an' furniture for a liT shack. But I'm reasonable. I don't like to be hard on folks; so I'm open to an offer, Mr. Shaw. What'll you gimme to down Tom Johnson?"

Jack Shaw was dumb. Stuart opened his mouth as if to speak, but thought better of it, and jerked his horse about.

"I'll see yuh again!" was Shaw's parting remark, as he rode off after Stuart.

"Better see yore foreman first," advised Gilmore in a long-drawn shout. "Last time I saw Slim, he was askin' for yuh right affectionate!"

But Shaw did not even turn his head.

CHAPTER XVIII

"YUH ain't goin' back to the Lazy D!" Jimmy exclaimed in alarm.

"Shore I am," replied Gilmore. "I wouldn't miss it for a ranch in Old Mexico. Look a here Johnson rustles the cows from the Hash Knife an' the V Up-an'-Down, an' through Enright sells 'em to Oyle at, as he thinks, the market. I suppose, seem' as they're stolen anyway, Johnson hadn't the nerve to ask more; but nothin' like that bothered Enright. He, havin' it ail fixed up how he'll divvy with Johnson at fifteen a head, sells 'em to Oyle at somethin' over my price o' nineteen twenty, probably. Shore, if it had been less 'n nineteen, the agent wouldn't 'a' taken me up at that price. He'd 'a' stuck to his old friend Deputy Dick. It's as plain as the W. G. R. brand, an' that takes up the whole side of a cow. Tom Johnson'll see it yuh can bet yore saddle an' slicker on that. An' what's more, now that Stuart an' Shaw know that their dear friend has been runnin' a ranikaboo on 'em, do yuh s'pose they'll take it sittin' down, or write him a letter? Not if I know 'em they won't. They'll paint for war prompt an' sudden, an' more'n

likely they'll head for Plain Edge as fast as bosses can drag it!"

Jimmy and Smoky began to laugh.

"I see it now," said Jimmy. "With Stuart an' Shaw knowin' that Enright ain't their friend no more, Plain Edge is liable to witness times."

"Yo're whistlin', an' if they take to wipin' each other out, it ought to make the job o' reformin' Glenn County a heap easy," chuckled Gilmore.

"Yuh long-legged oF rascal!" exclaimed the admiring Jimmy. "Yuh shore do use yore head now an' then! Say!" as Gilmore swung his foot sidewise "leave my cayuse alone! I don't allow nobody to kick him but me. Quit it, can'tcha? There ugh! now yuh've set him off ugh! an' I've just et!"

When Jimmy had reduced his emotional mount to partial submission and resumed his place, Gilmore was squinting far ahead, where the trail vanished between two hills.

"If I didn't like a sharp," he observed, "an' I kind o' wanted to ventilate him, an' he was due to ride this trail, I dunno but what I'd wait for him right there behind a tree on one of those two hills."

"She ees a good plass," agreed Smoky.

"Yuh bet she is! Jimmy, s'pose you ride on, an' if yuh get through without bein' downed or nicked, come back an' tell us. We'll wait right here."

"You go to Hell!" cried Jimmy. "Yuh talk like I was a cat or somethin' with nine lives. Besides, my will ain't made, an' a fellah as sinful as me hadn't ought to cash without repentin' anyway. An' I don't feel like repentin', nohow."

"Well, if yuh won't go, yuh won't," Gilmore sighed in mock resignation. "I s'pose we'll have to circle those hills. I guess, though, if we got on top of one of them, we might be able to see if anybody's hid out."

Accordingly, they departed from the trail, and rode among draws and small, brushy flats for the space of three hours. At the end of that time they were climbing the southern slope of one of the two hills. They reached the top, dismounted in a lean grove of pines, and went forward on foot.

Near the top of the reverse slope they lay down in the tall grass, wriggled forward, and gazed downward. Far below was the ribbon of trail, and beyond it rose the steep slope of the opposite hillside.

At first Gilmore saw nothing save the trees and the rocks and the grass waving in the wind. Suddenly something twinkled on the hillside, above the trail. With the help of the field-glasses he discerned, projecting beyond a boulder, a man's booted legs. The hidden enemy's spurs twinkled his betrayal as he crossed one ankle over the other.

"One of 'em's behind that white boulder," announced Gilmore. "I can't make out the other. Let's work west an' see if we can't pick up their horses."

They worked west, and in a hollow a hundred yards beyond the ambushed citizen they saw two horses tied to a young sapling.

"A gray an' a sorrel," observed Gilmore. "Stuart rode a gray an' Shaw a sorrel. It's our dear friends, all right! Jimmy, you take the gray an' I'll take the sorrel. Smoky, bein' upwind where the smoke won't blow in his eyes, can look out for developments."

The two Winchesters barked almost together. The sorrel collapsed quietly; the gray gave a convulsive leap, and a scream of agony drifted thinly to their ears.

Jimmy swore, and righted his bungle with a clean shot.

"I dunno how I come to do such ragged work. Lookout!"

Below them, on their own hillside, a rifle cracked, and a bullet whisped through the grassstems close beside Gilmore's cheek. Smoky sent three rapid bullets in the center of the smokecloud. Gilmore rolled backward, seized Jimmy by the ankles, and jerked him to safety behind a rock.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Jimmy, sitting up in a rage. "I was just cuttin' down on that feller behind the white boulder, an' you gotta spoil it all! Yuh big id jit, yuh got a nerve, you have!"

"That's old man Stuart behind the boulder," Gilmore explained gently. "I don't want him downed 'less it's absolutely necessary."

"I know, but he'd 'a' got yuh if he could," snarled the disgruntled Jimmy. "Yo're too charitable by half, Dal. I tell yuh, yuh'll be downed first thing yuh know, an' then yuh'll wish yuh'd let me finish my shot."

"Maybe, I dunno. Let's be wanderin'." At that moment Smoky joined them. He was shoving cartridges into the loading-gate of his rifle, and his black eyes were glittering with pleasurable excitement.

"Eef I deed not geet Jack Shaw, I part hees hair good!" he declared. "By gar, I do! I deed not shoot at de ol' man Stuart. I t'ink you not wan' heem for be shot, mabbeso."

"Yo're a mind-reader, Smoky," pronounced Gilmore.

"You fellers make me sick!" Jimmy declared. "I give up. Why not let's go down an' buy 'em a drink?" he added, with elaborate sarcasm.

The three returned to their horses in silence, but the peevish Jimmy refused to ride with the others. He brought up the rear, smoking cigarettes incessantly, and making caustic comment on tender-hearted charity, both abstract and concrete.

By sunset, however, an afternoon's self-communion had had its effect on Jimmy. He came out of his sulk, and signified his emergence by dropping a horny beetle down Gilmore's neck. Then there was a vigorous rough-and-tumble, which did not end till Nivette wished to know if he was expected to cook supper with people falling over him all the time.

"I don't guess they could get horses before this mornin'," Gilmore remarked, after breakfast on the following day.

"Noon, mabbeso," said the half-breed. "Dose heel was t'irty mile from de fort, un dere was no ranch nearer dan dat. Dere ees no stage to de fort only de freight-wagon, un dey do not come for two week. By gar, dem men weel have to walk, un dat weel tak long tarn. Dey weel have de sore feet before dey get dere!"

"Will they?" Jimmy asked in a sardonic tone. "Not if they're in the middle o' that cloud o' dust they won't!"

Gilmore and Smoky looked back over the way they had come. Nine or ten miles distant a small dust-cloud was distinctly visible on w the trail. Gilmore whipped out the field-glasses.

"Mules!" he announced. "Four of 'em. By the way they're a-comin', she's a light wagon."

"Has de waqon a square, white top?" inquired Nivette.

"Yep."

"Den she ees de ambulance takin' de officer or de officer's woman to de railroad. Mabbeso dey meet Stuart un Shaw un geeve dem a ride."

"In that case we want to know it. Here's as good a place as any, when we've moved the bosses farther back. Yuh know a short cut, don't yuh, Smoky, so's we can get in front of 'em again?"

"Shore Leetle Cloud Mountain. Dey mus' follow de trail roun', un we can go troo de canon."

From their vantage-point among the trees on the knoll where they had made camp they watched the oncoming mules and their attendant dustcloud. When the teams were six miles away, they dipped out of sight, and did not reappear till they pulled out of a draw not more than four hundred yards distant.

They came at a brisk trot, the creaking vehicle behind them so gray with dust that the red cross behind the driver's seat showed a faded pink. It was indeed the Fort Henderson ambulance, under escort of two troopers; but neither dusty ambulance nor dustier soldiers interested the three on the knoll. Their attention was centered on the driver's seat, where, beside the driver, sat Alec Stuart and Jack Shaw.

"Let's drag it," suggested Gilmore, when all that remained to tell of the ambulance's passing was a settling cloud of dust-particles.

Keeping two miles or more in the rear of the ambulance which distance was not strictly necessary, for now the trail ran among the hills, and no straight reach was more than three or four hundred

yards long they neared Little Cloud Mountain, and turned aside into Little Cloud Canon.

The going was bad windfalls where there were not huge rocks, and once they had to dismount and practically haul the horses between two boulders, each of them larger than the Ace Saloon.

"I'm surprised the trail don't run through here," observed Jimmy, thumping his discouraged mount through the crackling branches of a windfall. "Yuh'd only have to take a freightwagon to pieces about six times to get this far. Here's a nice little pebble to have fall on yore head! It don't weigh more'n twenty ton at the outside. I s'pose they all come from the mountain, huh, Smoky?"

"Shore," answered the half-breed. "Dey fall off w'en de fros' she loosen dem een de wintair. Een de summair dey fall leetle, not much."

"That's cheerin'," said Gilmore. "Here's hopin'!"

Gr-r-ruck! Shus-s-sh! Bam! Several rocks of assorted sizes, the smallest larger than a wheelbarrow, plunged down the wall of the canon and smashed into the ground a hundred yards in their rear.

"They don't fall so very little, at that," was Gilmore's comment. "What's the matter, Jimmy nervous?"

"Me nervous? Oh, no, not so yuh could notice it. I enjoy havin' rocks sailin' down all round me. I like it shore I do. Gives me a appetite for my chuck, it does. O' course, Dal, if yuh feel like yuh just got to go slow, lemme get in front. I think there's a gent waitin' for me at the other end o' this canon, an' I don't like to keep him waitin'. It ain't polite."

Luckily for Jimmy's peace of mind they won to the end of the canon

without witnessing another rock-slide. The passage had occupied them the better part of three hours; but from now on, according to Nivette, the traveling would be easy.

Relatively speaking, it was easy, and they made good progress; yet there is always a fly in the ointment. In this case there was quite a large one.

Coming to a wide creek, Nivette advised trotting across, the sole available fording-place having a quicksand bottom. The half-breed crossed without difficulty, and so did Jimmy, but not so Gilmore. His horse picked the exact middle of the stream as the most suitable spot to stop and drink. Gilmore howled, and employed spurs and quirt. The pony, usually an animal of equable temper, laid back his ears, squealed, and strove nobly to buck. To his frantic astonishment, he found himself unable to move his legs. Fetlock deep in the sucking grip of the quicksand, he was slowly sinking deeper.

His equine brain rocked on its bed-plates. Rank terror descended upon him, and he screamed.

"Shut up, yuh id jit!" exclaimed Gilmore, hastily unstrapping his rope. "Yuh don't deserve to get out. I'd ought to leave yuh right here!"

Working swiftly and expertly, Gilmore contrived to pass his rope around the horse's body, just behind the shoulders. He made a bowline, and flung the end ashore to the waiting Jimmy, who snubbed it round his saddle-horn. The halfbreed, whirling a small loop, made a good throw and fastened on Gilmore's horn. Gilmore freed the rope and made it fast to the bowline on the side opposite the knot.

The pony was down to his hocks when the two horses ashore began

to pull. Holding the terrified animal's nose above water, Gilmore looked down and saw the ripples chase one another between his mount's ears before the steady tug from the shore had any effect.

Slowly, very slowly, the pony's legs were torn free. His head went under as he turned on his side; but the two horses on the ropes were going fast now. With Gilmore out of the saddle, and hanging for dear life to the horn, the halfdrowned animal was pulled from the water and skated up on the bank.

"This is lovely, this is!" cried Gilmore when he discovered that his mount would require at least half a day's rest before he could proceed. "Twelve hours' delay! They'll get to Virgin City ahead of us, that's a cinch!"

CHAPTER XIX

EARLY in the following evening the three rode into Virgin City, and went at once to the rear door of the Ace Saloon. In the saloon, and in the street beyond, sundry folk, each after his fancy, were busily establishing the fact that it is a white man's inalienable prerogative to pursue pleasure as fast as he sees fit. One of those in the street was pursuing it on a pony. He emphasized his enjoyment with loud yells, and at short intervals fired his revolver.

In the saloon a fiddle was jigging forth the heartsome strains of the "Arkansaw Traveler." Many boot-heels were scraping the splintery planks, while an enthusiastic trio bellowed the words. To add to the 'general harmony, an infant in the house next door was voicing at the full top of lusty lungs his disgust for a grown-up world.

Gilmore had dismounted, and was approaching the door, when it opened and a man emerged. He was far gone in liquor, this citizen.

He did not attempt to close the door. Staggering, mumbling to himself, he made his uneven way to the wood-pile, where he sat down and began in all solemnity to remove his boots.

"Evenin'!" was Gilmore's greeting, as he approached the inebriated one. "Have yuh seen Stuart or Shaw anywhere round to-night?"

"Sh-shore, they're inside, both of 'em," the other answered. "An' ain't Jack d-d-drunk? If I ever gug-got as pup-pup-pie-eyed as that bub-but I wouldn'. Nun-not me! I know when I've had enough, an' an' I al'ays pup-puppup-pack my m-m-m money in my bub-boots!"

Gravely he upended one boot and poured therefrom several silver dollars and four-bit pieces. They rolled this way and that, to the perplexity and mental anguish of their owner. Overwhelmed by his troubles, he toppled over on his face and lay weeping among his scattered money and the morning's kindling-wood.

Gilmore stepped over him and returned to the open door. He stood a little on one side of the doorway and reflected. He wished very much to enter the Ace Saloon and hold speech with Mrs. Kyle. His desire to avoid trouble with Mr. Stuart was equally strong. Stronger than both these things was his dislike for a policy of side-stepping. To dodge a row or run out of one had never been his custom.

He peered through the doorway. Across the darkness of the back room and the short hall, whose doors were flung wide, he could see into the garish brightness of the barroom itself. The dancers whirled among the eddying wreaths of tobacco-smoke. The customers at the bar were making very merry.

Stuart and Shaw were nowhere visible, but Gilmore supposed that they must be at one of the small tables opposite the bar. He stepped into the back room, hoping that he might find some one to take a

message to Mrs. Kyle, when he heard her voice. It came from the hall between the back room and the saloon.

"Leave me alone!" she was exclaiming in a tense whisper.

"Aw, Mary jane, yuh needn't be so almighty finicky!" protested a man's voice that of Jack Shaw. "After the way yuh carried on with -"

Smack! A hearty slap interrupted him right there.

"Another yap out o' you, and I'll kill you!" was the woman's furious threat.

"Come here!" ordered Shaw.

There was a rip as of a fabric tearing, and Mrs. Kyle fled into the back room, her waist torn at the shoulder, Jack Shaw in close pursuit. Gilmore sprang forward and bent his gun across Shaw's head. The V Up-and-Down man went down flat just as Mrs. Kyle jerked a derringer from her bosom, whisked about, and fired twice.

Gilmore, in the double flash of the little gun's discharge, had an instantaneous glimpse of old Alec Stuart's face over the shoulder of the falling Shaw. Then he was coughing in the pungent powder-smoke, and saw but dimly.

"What'sa matter? What'sa matter?" Jimmy was crying at his side.

"Get the woman away!"

"Smoky's done it. Come on!"

The music had stopped in the middle of a bar. In the saloon there was deep silence; but not for long. The habitués of the place, hot and eager with curiosity, and hearing no more shots, crowded into the

hall.

"It's old Alec!" exclaimed a tall puncher of the V Up-and-Down. "An' here's Jack!" he added, coming into the back room and striking a match.

"Alec's gone out!" called another. "Two shots plumb through his heart! Who done it?"

"I dunno," the bartender answered. "Is Jack cashed?"

"He's breathin'," said the tall puncher laconically. "Got a bed handy?"

"Shore, put him in mine," the bartender answered.

"Who done it? Who done it?" clamored the crowd, as Shaw was taken away.

"How do I know?" bawled the exasperated puncher. "There wasn't nobody in this room when I come in. Ask me somethin' easy, why don'tcha? Take Stuart's feet, Rufe, will yuh? Lemme through, can'tcha? Didn'tcha ever see a downed gent before?"

"A-agh-ugh!"

A wheezing grunt issued from the throat of the supposed corpse, to the horror of the bearers, who promptly dropped it and stood back well back. The corpse sat up. It rubbed its stomach and swore aloud.

"What you id jits try in' to do?" came the question in the well-known voice of Mr. Alec Stuart. "Wanta kill a man, throwin' me round thisaway? Who hit me anyway?"

"Yo're sh-shot," stuttered the tall puncher. "Plumb through the heart, too! Look at the blood all over yore shirt!"

Mr. Stuart looked down at the shirt in question, and delved within a drenched breast-pocket. He removed therefrom several pieces of broken glass, and flung them afar.

"Med'cine," he observed. "Med'cine for the toothache. Must 'a' broke the bottle. An' my watch" again the hand was plunged into the pocket "my watch" the hand was withdrawn "is say, who busted my watch?"

He dangled before the multitude a bent and shattered watch. He rose to his feet, and by the light of a lamp obligingly held out by the bartender, examined the wrecked timepiece. Embedded in the battered metal and among the twisted wheels were two flattened bullets.

"Derringer bullets," he remarked. "Who's been practisin' on me? I'd shore admire to know who's been turnin' loose his artillery in my direction!"

"None of us did, yuh can gamble on that," the tall puncher told him.

"Some gent did," insisted Stuart. "Here's the proof in these bullets. I remember comin' in here. I was goin' outside, an' I just got past the door when there was a flash plumb in my eyes, an'

I got this belt in the chest, an' I don't remember another thing. Yo're shore there wasn't nobody else in here when yuh come in?"

"Nobody but Jack Shaw," was the answer. "Some gent had took a smash at his head, an' he shore did land. Jack's in on the bartender's bed right now, senseless as jerky."

Well away in the darkness Gilmore and Jimmy held the three horses and awaited the return of the half-breed.

"Youghta plugged him, Dal, 'stead o' just whangin' him over the head," chided Jimmy.

"I guess maybe I'll have to yet," grumbled Gilmore.

"Yuh shore will! It's like I always says, yo're too tender-hearted. Yuh let a fellah impose on yuh thataway, an' wait till he crowds yuh, 'stead o' rubbin' him out in the beginnin' an' settlin' his troubles once for all."

Gilmore nodded without hearing a word of what his friend was saying.

"I shore hope the old man ain't gone out," was Gilmore's fervent declaration. "It'll be hard on his daughter if he did!"

"Many a good horse dies," Jimmy quoted.

"Yeah; but"

"It wasn't yore fault." Consolingly.

"It ain't that. Yuh don't understand at all."

"Nor you, neither. Yuh make me plumb weary. Here yuh go moonin' an' carryin' on over an old gent who was only too anxious to down yuh, just as if yuh'd turned the trick yoreself. Don't be so sorrowful about it. Maybe he ain't cashed after all."

"De ol' man she ees not hurt," reported Nivette a half -hour later, and told of the lifesaving watch.

"That's shore a heap providential," said Gilmore, relieved. "Saves a lot of trouble, all right! Djuh get her away, Smoky?"

"Shore! I tak' Meesus Kyle een troo de side door. Nobody see her.

Nobody but us un Jack Shaw know she shoot de gun. She ees safe now from Jack Shaw. By gar, yes! I weel be here, un I weel spik wit' Meestair Shaw. She geeve me dis for you, Dal."

"Dis" was a letter. Gilmore took the missive, opened it, and struck a match. It ran:

DEAR MR. GILMORE:

Jack Shaw and Alec Stuart have planned to kill you at the first opportunity. Probably you know this, so I'm wasting time telling you. But what you don't know is that they intend to entice you to the Hash Knife and then murder you. The plan is to use a letter of Louise Stuart's. It will be a forgery. Shaw is an excellent penman. Look out for them.

If I learn anything else, I will let you know somehow. Yours truly,

MRS. MARYJANE KYLE.

The match flickered out and left Gilmore staring at the white blotch of the paper in his hand; but he was not thinking of the letter's meaning. His brain was busy with what, to his mind, was vital in every way.

"I gotta see Mrs. Kyle," Gilmore suddenly announced.

"Oh, shore, right now," was Jimmy's sarcastic comment. "It'd be right healthy to go makin' calls now, wouldn't it?"

"You stay here with the hosses," said the unheeding Gilmore, "an' Smoky an' me'll take a liT pasear back to town."

And back to town they went, despite the earnest protests of Jimmy. Gilmore crawled in at Mrs. Kyle's opened window, while the invaluable Nivette, simulating drunkenness, stood guard at a corner

of the building.

CHAPTER XX

MRS. KYUE placed a screen in front of the window, lighted a lamp, and turned the wick low. She looked at Gilmore with bright eyes.

"I'm glad I didn't kill him," she said in a low voice; "but I'd shoot him again, I guess, if he tried to grab me the way he did that time!"

"An' serve him right," observed Gilmore; "but watch yoreself , an' yuh won't have to. He'll get all tangled up in his rope yet. Yuh'll see! I got yore letter," he added with a keen look.

She nodded.

"I know," she said. "One of the Hash Knife boys got drunk, and told their plan of the forged letter to my bartender, and Tom told me. That was at five o'clock this afternoon. I wrote the letter right away. I didn't know where I could reach you, but I thought I'd better write it, anyway. Good thing I did!"

She dropped her eyes and began aimlessly to pick at the deerskin table-cover. Gilmore laid the letter on the table.

"Yuh wrote that," he observed; "but did yuh write this?"

He laid another letter beside the first. This second letter was the one delivered by Smoky Nivette on the trail to Plain Edge. Mrs. Kyle stared at the letter. Slowly she raised her eyes to his face.

"Why" she began nervously.

"What's the use?" he asked. "If yuh wrote this second letter, yuh

didn't write the first. The handwritings different, an' the way it's written is different. What I want to know is, who wrote this first letter?"

His lean forefinger tapped the crinkled rectangle of paper. Mrs. Kyle looked at him reflectively.

"I oughtn't to tell you," she said at last. "Louise and Smoky told me not to, but I guess I must. Louise Stuart wrote that first letter. She had just ridden in when she found out that the boys were organizing to go after you, and she fixed up the letter to look as if I wrote it, and sent it off by Smoky. I'd have done it myself, only only I didn't think of it."

"I know!" he said gently. "I'm thankin' yuh just the same. I'm obliged to yuh for tellin' me."

He folded both letters and put them back in his pocket.

"I wish you luck," said Mrs. Kyle, holding out her hand.

"Thanks," he said, squeezing her fingers with unconscious roughness.

"Don't mind what Louise says," she told him. "Make her marry you!"

"Has she been talkin' to yuh?" he asked in amazement.

"Never mind whether she has or not; but follow my advice. And whatever you do, don't tell her I told you about the letter or any thing else."

At this juncture there came a rap on the door. Gilmore wheeled toward the window. From the street came the whistled lilt of "Billy Venero" Nivette's signal that some one was coming round the house. No escape through the window!

Again the rap on the door, and a voice called loudly on Mrs. Kyle.

"Here!" she whispered sharply, and pushed Gilmore behind one section of the screen. The other section she angled in such a manner that he was completely hidden from an observer at either the window or the door.

"Hey, are yuh deaf in there?" bawled the irritated voice on the other side of the door.

"You'll soon find out whether I'm deaf or not," Mrs. Kyle replied with spirit, "if you don't stop kicking that door! What do you want?"

"Want you to come and look after Jack. He needs a woman. We're goin' to search yore room, too."

At these words Gilmore dragged out his gun. Mrs. Kyle gave a hearty laugh.

"Going to search my room, are you?" she cried. "That's good, that is! I can see myself letting you do it! Who's we, might I ask?"

She walked to the door, unlocked it, and flung it open. The lamplight fell on the faces of several men gathered round the doorway. One of them was the tall V Up-and-Down puncher who had pronounced Alec Stuart dead.

The intruders shuffled in embarrassment. The tall puncher cleared his throat. It was comparatively simple to talk through a door, but it was different when confronted by the lady.

"Yuh see, ma'am," he said ingratiatingly, "we've done searched the whole saloon for the gent who hit Shaw, an' we'd like to search yore room, too, if you don't mind."

"We don't care nothin' about pokin' through a lady's room," a comrade hastened to say. "It was yore idee. You can have the credit."

"Well--" began the tall puncher.

"Oh, yes, I see!" said Mrs. Kyle, her handsome eyes appraising him. "You're the man who couldn't tell the difference between toothache medicine and blood, aren't you? Are you sure you'd know the man you're hunting for? I don't--"

But the tall puncher had already departed. His friends, roaring with laughter at Mrs. Kyle's wit, followed. The widow closed the door and locked it. She walked to the window and looked out.

"Quick!" she whispered, pulling back the screen. "There's no one in sight but Smoky."

Gilmore slid over the window-sill, joined Smoky, and together they hurried back to the waiting Jimmy, who received them with strong language.

"Say, this hoss-holdin' is no cinch," he stated feelingly, when he had sworn off most of his temper. "Twice gents ride by me, an' I have to squeeze the noses of three hosses to keep 'em from whinnerin' an' me with only two hands. An' then a drunk sport comes out here an' goes for to rustle my own special hoss. I whangs him over the head, you bet! Oh, I thank yuli for a very pleasant and sociable evenin', Mr. Gilmore an' company! Next time I'm goin' with yuh."

"Aw, shut up!" retorted Gilmore pleasantly. "Yo're a selfish jigger always wantin' all the fun. Y'ain't happy till yuh get it. Don't fret, yuh'll get all the fun that's comin' to yuh before long. Smoky, we'll be seein' yuh soon couple o' weeks, maybe. Take care o' yoreself!"

Gilmore and Jimmy jogged off, heading in the direction of the Lazy D. The irrepressible Jimmy endeavored to keep a conversation going, but Gilmore was hardly more responsive than a wooden Indian.

"What'sa matter with yuh?" cried the disgusted Jimmy. "Here I've done asked yuh over an' over for a match, an' yuh just sit there an' chuckle at nothin'. Gimme a match, will yuh?"

Gilmore turned a slow head.

"Did you speak?"

"Me? No, I didn't say a word. I was just singin' a song to myself. I don't believe in talkin'. Strains the throat. Now that I've got yore attention, yuh might gimme a match, if yo're shore I ain't troublin' yore highness too much."

Gilmore told Jimmy where to go, and pulled a match from his hatband. One could not blame the deputy for being in an abstracted frame of mind. Any man who has just discovered that his beloved loves him cannot be held responsible; and that Louise had responded to his swift passion Gilmore did not doubt for an instant. How he was to bring about the all-important wedding did not bother him in the slightest degree.

"It's a cinch!" he told himself. "Now I know how I stand, everything'll work out all right!"

It was early in the evening when Gilmore and Jimmy rode in among the buildings of the Lazy D ranch. They could easily have arrived in the daylight, but the darkness was safer. News travels slowly in the cow country, but there was no knowing what choice bits might have drifted to the Lazy D. Caution always pays.

Their first step was to saddle the dun, which had recovered its strength and spirits, and another horse, and tie them to the stockade of the nearest corral. Then they went to the cookshack, knowing well that the latest gossip, if there were any, would sauce their food; but the cook had nothing to tell them. He sulkily placed cold beans and beef on the table, and would have let them go coffeeless had not Gilmore persuaded him to do otherwise.

"An' yuh can give us some o' that pie," said Gilmore over his third cup. "Yeah, that one. Looks good, don't it?"

The tone was light, but the blue eyes were heavily compelling. The pie was supplied.

Supper finished, Gilmore and Jimmy strolled across to the office. Tom Johnson's saturnine countenance lowered at their entrance, and his little green eyes narrowed. Somehow, at that 'particular moment, he reminded Gilmore of the lank hogs of the Ozarks.

"Whatcha laughin' at?" Johnson wished to know.

"Somethin' I saw once back in Arkansaw," answered Gilmore. "I think o' things like that once in a while. Can't help it. It's shore grown to be a habit. How are yuh, anyway? Me, I'm enjoyin' my usual good health. Take a chair, Jimmy. Make yoreself at home. We're all friends here."

Mr. Johnson smiled a sour smile.

"I dunno--" he began.

"I do," interrupted the cheery Gilmore. "Yuh were goin' to say yuh don't see how yuh stand my foolishness. Shore yuh weret Can't fool me. I know yuh, yuh good-natured old rascal. Honest, Tommy, if I was

so overflowin' with the milk o' human kindness like you are, I'd bust. I shore would! Couldn't stand the strain. But you were sayin' somethin' don't let me interrupt."

Gilmore leaned back in his chair and fanned himself with his hat. He was smiling serenely.

Johnson spat on the floor and reached for the matches.

"I've seen eight-day clocks," he observed acridly, "but you never seem to run down. Don't y'ever worry about yore mainspring bustin'?"

"Never," was the bland reply.

Tom Johnson gave it up and turned to Jimmy.

"Any other name besides Jimmy?" he inquired.

"Not to you," replied that personage.

"I see yo're like yore friend. Yuh look young."

"Don't let yore eyes deceive yuh."

"All right, I won't. Yuh know what yuh gotta do?"

"Shore!" "Then I guess that's all for to-night."

"No, it ain't all," spoke up Gilmore. "I kind o' guess, Tom, yuh'll be interested in hearin' what I found out at the Fort Henderson agency,"

"What do yuh know about the agency? I didn't tell yuh to go there."

"I know yuh didn't, but then I figured yuh couldn't be expected to know as much as I did, so I went there."

"Go on!" Johnson's voice was harsh.

"I found that Enright, o' Plain Edge, has been sellin' cows to the government at somethin' over the market."

Lively suspicion looked out of Johnson's small, close-set eyes.

"Say, who are you, anyway?"

"Dan Gill, like I told yuh. When I'm on a job like the one you gave me, I always use my head an' go Injunin' round all over the country; so yuh needn't be surprised at any thin' I do. I got to talkin' confidential with the Injun agent, Oyle. He told me quite a tale. Did yuh know, Johnson, that Enright signed a voucher for somethin' like twenty dollars a head on two hundred an' fifty cows?"

Johnson sprang right out of his chair. His fist crashed down on the desk.

"Dam' his soul!" he exploded. "He told me fifteen!"

"I expect," Gilmore commented gently; "but it ain't necessary to tell the neighbors about it."

"Did yuh see the voucher?" demanded Johnson, still on his feet.

"Didn't need to," replied Gilmore, and forthwith made clear to Johnson his reasons for suspecting Enright.

Striding to and fro the length of the office in his rage, Johnson swore violently.

"I never did trust him! I'll play even with him, the--"

"Five times two fifty, that's twelve hundred an' fifty dollars," cut in

Gilmore, thoughtfully fanning the flames of Johnson's wrath. "That's a lot o' money. He shore could 'a' split even without hurtin' himself."

"I'll fill him so full o' lead he'll rattle!" fumed Tom Johnson.

Jimmy grinned quietly at the floor. Gilmore rolled a meticulous cigarette.

"I thought yuh said yuh was new to this country!"

Johnson had halted in his wild parade, and flung the remark at Gilmore with the suddenness of a pistol-shot.

"Don't ask me too many questions, Johnson," drawled Gilmore, blowing a smoke-ring ceilingward.

"That's all right, but this about Enright. Yuh talk like yuh know him!"

"Maybe I do. What's it to yuh so long's I do what I'm paid to do?"

"Well--"

"Here, take a look at this."

Gilmore, whose hand had been busy within his vest, flipped a playing-card toward Johnson. It fell between them on the table. Johnson leaned forward. His hot eyes perceived that the card was the ace of spades and bore a memorandum and an I. O. U. He picked it up and looked at Gilmore.

"Yore friend Enright is mighty careless with his personal property," explained Gilmore. "Yuh'd ought to tell him to be more careful."

Johnson tore the card into bits and flung them on the floor.

"It don't make no difference," he said. "I wouldn't pay him now, nohow. When are yuh goin' down an' hire out to the Hash Knife?"

Gilmore's face went solemn.

"Stuart's dead," said he.

"When d'juh get him?" was Tom's quick question.

"I didn't, but somebody else did. It don't matter who. Anyway, he's gone out, an' you save five hundred. Jack Shaw's next, huh?"

"Yo're shore the old man's dead?"

"Y'ain't doubtin' my word, are yuh?"

"No, oh, no, but -

"There ain't any buts. We'll be pushin' on to our next job to-morrow; but yuh understand that we don't hire out to the V Up-and-Down. Jack Shaw'll be put where he won't bother folks, but it'll be done our way."

"Any way, any way you like best the bridle's off!"

"That's all right. Glad yuh see it that way. But look here, what do yuh say to me an' my friend takin' Enright's place in the next beef contract? When I was talkin' to the agent, he took me up at nineteen."

"Took yuh up at nineteen?"

"Shore! I didn't know where I'd get the cows, but I guessed I could rustle 'em some'eres."

"I guess yuh could. I'll go yuh on yore prop'sition. Split even with you you two against me."

"Will they be the same brands Lazy H-in-a- Circle an' A Up-an'-Down?"

"Shore! Listen!"

The lean villain proceeded to relate the precise manner in which the cattle were rustled, as opportunity offered, from the Hash Knife, the V Up-and-Down, and sundry other ranches, rebranded, drifted across the ranges, and finally turned over to the Indian agent.

"Gimme five years," said Johnson in conclusion, "an' I'll have pretty near every cow in the Territory!"

Gilmore believed him. At ten o'clock he and Jimmy left the office. At ten thirty the manager retired. At eleven thirty he was awakened by a cold ring of metal pressed tightly against his temple.

"Don't yell," a calm voice commanded him. "An' I wouldn't move too sudden, either. I know it's dark, but the window's wide open, an' yuh can see enough to put on yore clo'es, I guess. Get up an' begin, an' remember LiT Willy's watchin' yuh all the time."

"Say, Gill, is this a joke?" Tom Johnson was careful not to speak above a whisper.

"I never joke," was the severe reply. "Get up!"

Tom Johnson arose softly.

"What do yuh want, anyway?"

"Yoreself, that's all."

"But--"

"There yuh go buttin' again. Yo're always buttin'. Seems like yuh don't know any other word. I might as well tell yuh I'm a deputy, named Gilmore. Too bad yuh didn't know that when yuh were tellin' Jimmy an' me all about yore rustlin'! It shore was an interestin' story.

The judge an' the jury'll enjoy hearin' it that an' how yuh hired me to rub out three men. An' yuh can take it from me, I won't be so careless about hangin' on to Exhibit A in the shape o' that I. O. U. yuh gave me, as Enright was with the one yuh gave him. That's right cuss all yo're a mind to. When yo're dressed, Jimmy'll go down to the bunkhouse an' bring back yore foreman. Yuh'll be sittin' in the office then, behind yore desk. Yuh'll tell the foreman yuh gotta go away for a while, two-three weeks, maybe, on business; but yuh won't let on anythin' to the foreman. Yuh won't even wink yore eye at him, 'cause I'll be sittin' in here in the dark with the door open an' my gun appointin' at yore tummy. Jimmy'll be standin' some'eres behind the foreman, an' he won't have his eyes closed, exactly. Do yuh understand? Speak up, man! I can't hear yuh."

It was a choked and spluttery "yes" that Mr. Johnson uttered.

CHAPTER XXI

A FEW days later Doheny, the efficient marshal of Warrior's Mark, was sitting on the jail steps, conversing with another eminent citizen, when he raised his eyes and glanced along the dusty street.

"Here comes that feller Gilmore again," said he. "Who's he got this trip?"

"I dunno," answered the eminent citizen, squinting his eyes. "Yes, I do, too. It's Johnson Tom Johnson, manager o' the Lazy D."

"Are yuh shore o' that?"

"Shore as yo're a foot high. I seen Tom Johnson more'n once in Virgin City an' Plain Edge both. I'd know him well enough anywhere."

"This here is gettin' to be the supreme limit," Doheny announced with conviction.

The eminent citizen nodded.

"I got a hundred buckshot cartridges day before yest'day," he observed with seeming irrelevance.

"Yuh'll need 'em," grunted the marshal with perfect understanding.

"Howdy, folks?" Gilmore said gravely. "I hope, marshal, yore calaboose ain't filled!"

"Always room for one more," the marshal assured him, his impersonal gaze taking in Tom Johnson from hat to heels. "Why is it this time?"

"Rustling cattle an' conspiracy to commit murder," Gilmore replied smoothly.

"Why don'tcha make it arson an' stage-robbery?" sneered Johnson savagely.

"Don't get impatient maybe I will. Come on now, Tom, don't be a fool! It won't do yuh any manner o' good to wrastle round thisaway. I'll have to bust yuh one. Take his shoulders, Jimmy, an' we'll pack him inside."

"I didn't ask about any warrant," said the marshal, when Gilmore came out, "but --"

"Yuh can hold him till I get one from Plain Edge," cut in Gilmore.

"Yain't goin' to Plain Edge?"

"Shore, why not?"

"Yuh'll find out why not when yuh get there. I tell yuh plain like a friend yuh won't last more'n about a half a minute. Them fellers have come up here twice after the prisoners. Plain Edge is mad, an' gettin' madder, and yore strollin' into town will just about put the hat on the climax. If I was you, I wouldn't bother about no warrant not just now I wouldn't. I'll board Tom Johnson without it for a while."

"Yo're a regular gent, an' I appreciate yore offer, but it can't be did. There's got to be a warrant!"

" There'll be two funerals!"

"Yuh think so? Well, vuh wait an' see if there ain't a lot more'n two. Come on over an' have a drink. I'm drier'n a covered bridge."

"That was easy," commented Jimmy, when the two were riding out on the Plain Edge trail.

"Too easy," Gilmore answered. "Everything been that way so far. Hardly any trouble at all. They just fall into handcuffs an' jail like turtles slidin' off a log. We ain't gettin' our share o' hard times; but they'll come. They always do."

"Yuh betcha they will!" Jimmy assented. "Two men ag'in' a whole county is no snap. LIT Jimmy's the feller that always rides the buckin' hoss. Some day I'll learn sense, get married, an' stick to home like a Christian if I live long enough. Coin' to ride the trail the whole way to Plain Edge?"

"Shore! If there's anybody comin' from there I want to meet 'em."

But they met no one on the road, and on the following afternoon they halted a mile outside of Plain Edge to wait for nightfall and to rest their horses.

Two hours after sunset they mounted and, riding circumspectly, forded the river and approached the town by the Beardance trail. This entailed fording the stream a second time, but it was necessary, for among the cottonwoods along the river-bank lay the only safe shelter for Jimmy.

"But I wanna go, too," complained that young man, when told what his part in the action was to be. "It ain't no fun stickin' here a-suckin' my thumbs. Yuh may need me, Dal, then what'll yuh do? What did yuh write to me for to come an' help yuh, if the first time there's any real chance for trouble yuh go an' leave me behind? It ain't sensible, Dal!"

"Here yuh stay," the inexorable Gilmore told him. "How can yuh go with me when I gotta take yore hoss? They won't know me behind the whiskers, but they'll know the dun, won't they? Well then, quit yore bellerin'."

"Here's my hoss," snarled the hapless Jimmy. "Would yuh like my shirt, or my hat, or maybe my socks? I got a real fine pair o' boots. Yuh overlooked them. How about a cigarette? Can't I make yuh a couple o' dozen, an' stick 'em in yore mouth an' light 'em for yuh? But I draw the line at my gun an' my rifle an' my cartridges. If yuh don't object, I'd like to keep them with me!"

"You know where you can go!" Gilmore genially told his friend, and splashed down into the water on the borrowed horse.

Debating whether he should first go to Shorty Damman's hotel or to

the judge's house, he finally determined to call on his honor which, could he have known it, was a mistake. Unfortunately, Gilmore was not omniscient. He blithely dismounted in front of a saloon a few doors from the judge's house and tied his horse to the hitching-rail.

CHAPTER XXII

"TOWN'S mighty dead," thought Gilmore, glancing in at the open door of the saloon. "Nobody round but the bartender, an' he's asleep."

He looked up and down the street. There was no one in sight save a woman carrying home some groceries, and there were no ponies tied to any of the hitching-rails. Idly speculating, he walked down the street to the judge's house. Here was life, at least. Through the open windows he heard the clink of bottle nudging glass and the voices of men conferring together.

He walked boldly past the house, then tiptoed back and dodged in between it and the house next door. Edging along the wall, he took off his hat, crouched, and peered in at the corner of a window.

With his back toward Gilmore, and almost within arm's length, Judge Trivvy sat at a table. The shadow of the broad, judicial body, luckily for the watcher outside, fell across the lower half of the window. At the judge's right hand was Dick Enright, his hat far back on his head, his left hand cupped round a whisky-glass. The third man, who sat facing the judge, was a stranger to Gilmore.

He was a heavy-shouldered, bullet-headed man, this stranger, with a hairless face, prominent jaws, thin lips, large cheek-bones and outstanding ears. Completing the picture, as it were, the black eyes flanking his hooked nose were glassily cold in their blank stare.

Had Gilmore been a student of Grohmann or Lombroso, he would have known at once how to catalogue this repellent-looking person; but, not being conversant with the facial characteristics of the habitual murderer, he merely concluded that the stranger would be a good man to watch.

"It's shore queer there ain't nobody rubbed him out yet," the bullet-headed man was saying, his black eyes fixed on Enright.

"It is an exceptional case," cut in the learned judge. "This man is unusual, very unusual!"

"He must be," was the stranger's dry comment, delivered with curling, thin lips. "Yuh'd kind o' think he might be a crowd or somethin'."

"Yuh'll have yore hands full," growled Enright, carefully ignoring the other's palpable slur.

"Yes, I heard he carved his name on yore arm. Yuh can't move it right easy yet, can yuh?"

It suddenly broke upon Gilmore's consciousness that he himself was the subject of their conversation. With freshened interest he watched to see how Enright would take the stranger's last remark.

The Plain Edge deputy took it well enough.

He did not seem to be in a mood to resent any insult, no matter how flagrant, that evening.

"It should be a comparatively simple matter," hurriedly piped up the judge, "for you to er put this man Gilmore out of action. Very simple indeed! I--"

"Ye-es, I reckon that's why yuh sent for me an' are payin' me six hundred for the job--'cause it's so simple!"

"We--I was taken at a disadvantage," protested Judge Triwy, pouring himself a drink. "I was unable to reach my gun."

"Didn't Nivette tie yuh to a chair or somethin'?" the stranger asked curiously.

"He did, and Gilmore choked me. Could I have reached my gun--"

"Yuh'd have handed it over to him!" finished the stranger, and burst into a high-pitched cackle of laughter.

"Say, are yuh tryin' to make trouble?" demanded Enright, with a sudden show of spirit.

"Why, I ain't worryin'," was the placid reply. "I never try to make trouble."

Both men were included in the speaker's feline smile.

"Have another drink," invited Judge Triwy, and pushed the bottle toward the truculent one.

The man poured out one narrow finger, sipped it delicately, and then leaned back in his chair and rolled a cigarette with an expertness that even Gilmore could not have surpassed.

"One little thing more," observed the stranger, breaking a silence which had endured till his cigarette was smoked out. "I want half in advance."

"Half in advance!" the judge cried in alarm. "Why, my dear sir, we gave you a quarter in advance one hundred and fifty dollars not

twenty minutes ago."

"I ain't yore dear sir. I'm only workin' for yuh. I don't like yuh, an' yuh make me think of a fat frog, so snub up yore affection. I want one hundred an' fifty more, three hundred flat!"

"My friend -"

"I ain't yore friend, neither. Three hundred, I said. Keep me dangiin', an' I'll make it four hundred. I reckon now I will make it four hundred. Four hundred wheels from yore pockets into mine, or the deal's off!"

"All right, call it off!" exclaimed the exasperated Enright.

"Shore, call it off," agreed the stranger. "Couldn't suit me better, that couldn't. Don't have to do no work, an' I'm one hundred an' fifty to the good!"

"What? You mean you would keep our money? "The judge's voice was almost a shriek.

"Why not? I don't see nobody round here fit an' able to take it away from me."

The judge turned a doleful head toward Enright.

"What shall we do?" he queried helplessly.

"I s'pose you'll have to give it to him," Enright answered. "We'll have to give it to him, ygu mean," corrected the judge.

"I don't mean us at all. I mean you yes, you, yuh old sot. Fork over two hundred an' fifty an' give it to this graspin' gent!"

"I won't do it! I won't! It's robbery!"

"It's more than that," chimed in the stranger. "I'd do anything for money. Why, judge, if I was paid enough, I'd even cut yore throat!"

The judge was visibly agitated. He raised a glass to his lips, and one-third of the liquid slopped over and ran down his wrist.

"Why don't you chip in, Enright?" Judge Trivvy's tone was agonized.

"Because I ain't got it handy. Dig up the simoleons, y' old crab. Watcha waitin' for?"

"What a pleasant little family y'all are!" observed the stranger. "So lovin' like one might think yuh was related. I can't wait all night. Do I get my money, or don't I?"

"But how how do I know you will keep your promise?" quavered the judge.

The stranger leaned across the table.

"How do yuh know?" he said in a cold voice. "Did I hear yuh say them words?"

"No no, I didn't say that," the judge disclaimed. "I--I'll give you the money."

Enright laughed, but there was no answering smile on the stranger's face. Impassive, he watched the judge take a fat buckskin bag from his coat-pocket and count out on the table the necessary number of gold pieces. He pouched the money without a word of thanks, and remarked that he would start immediately.

"Yore not knowin' where this Gilmore is don't make it too easy," he added, rising. "I reckon I'll try Virgin City first."

"If he ain't there, go see Stuart o' the Hash Knife," suggested Enright. "He's a good friend o' mine, an' it's just a chance he'll maybe have heard somethin' about Gilmore. Jack Shaw o' the V Up-an'-Down is another one I know. He'll help yuh all he can. But yuh want to look out for the Triangle O an' the Lazy D. Keep away from 'em. If any o' them see yuh ridin' the range, they're a heap likely to beef yuh first an' ask yuh about it after. Glenn County ain't no health-resort!"

"So I heard. Don't yuh fret none about me. I'll be back to claim the other two hundred before long."

Abruptly he quitted the room. Gilmore could hear him walking away along the street.

"That Crowner is shore a hellion," remarked Enright, holding the bottle against the lamplight. "Not a man's drink left. Where's another bottle, judge?"

"There are no other bottles for you," was the pointed reply.

"Aw, don't be a crab, y' old miser! Anybody'd think yuh really care somethin' about that two fifty. I'll pay yuh back. I'd pay yuh right now, only I ain't got it with me."

"Oh, go to the devil!"

"Shut up, or I'll find a short;way to make yuh!"

"I've a good mind to cut loose from you entirely."

"Yuh can't afford to. S'pose Stuart an' Shaw ever found out you was in cahoots with Tom Johnson an' Oyle what then, huh?"

"You're in this deeper than I am."

"I know I am, but whose idea was it in the first place? Yuh won't be the silent partner yuh make out to be, if yuh ever break with me. Break with me! That shore listens well!"

Enright threw his head back and burst into a jarring laugh. The judge jerked open the tabledrawer. His fat fingers scrabbled within. Enright swung forward swiftly.

"None o' that, y' old fool!" he rapped out, gripping the other's wrist. "Let loose o' that gun, or I'll twist yore hand off! Oh, it hurts, huh? Then drop it. Here, I'll take it out o' yore reach. Don't move now while I feel yuh over for anythin' else."

"I sha'n't try to hurt you!" cried the judge. "I give you my word!"

"Yore word is worth about half as much as yore rotten self. I don't trust yuh for a minute. There now, I guess yuh ain't concealin' nothin' about yore person. Yuh can sit back if yuh like."

"I--I--I fear I nearly lost my temper," quavered the judge. "I apologize. This this business of fleeing with the hare and running with the hounds is very trying to the nerves."

"It's a fact, yuh don't know when yo're goin' to trip," Enright answered equably. "But keep yore heart up. A couple o' years more, what with both sides payin' for protection, an' them agency contracts, an' you an' I can retire."

"If young Drummond should come north, where will the contracts and half the protection be?"

"I'm bettin' he'll never come. The Double D is takin' all his time. Don't worry none Tom Johnson'll have a free hand for years yet." "Yes, but this cattle war may bring him."

"No 'twon't. Johnson's been sendin' him the best kind o' reports from the Lazy D. If he knowed the ranch was losin' cattle, it'd be different; but he don't, an' he won't, not with Tom manager. Anyway, s'pose the Lazy D an' Triangle O have suffered a lot, still, takin' it all in all, it's the V Up-an'-Down an' the Hash Knife that have come out the little end so far. One more o' the Hash Knife boys was clown'd about a week ago. Oh, Tom's shore a whizzer. He's got 'em all beat forty ways from the jack!"

"Oyle's the one to profit the most," grumbled the judge.

"Shore, but we can't all be Injun agents. I'm satisfied to be just a deputy."

"Are yuh?" said Gilmore, his gun poked across the window-sill. "Too bad the rest of us ain't!"

The command of "Hands up!" was quite unnecessary. At the sound of his voice two pairs of arms clawed ceilingward. Gilmore flung a leg over the sill and eased his body into the room without losing for an instant the magic of the drop.

Enright's face was a Japanese mask of malevolent hatred and the passion to kill. His washedout gray eyes were narrowed like a cat's.

The judge quivered as a well-made jelly quivers. His two chins visibly wobbled with apprehension.

Gilmore walked to the table and removed the lamp to the mantelpiece.

"So's yuh won't be tempted to knock it over," he explained, and stepped behind Enright. "Yuh'll excuse me for takin' yore gun an' the judge's," he continued, with elaborate politeness, removing the weapons. "Yo're so venturesome, you two, yo're liable to do 'most

any thin'. There, I guess we can all be happy now, but keep yore hands up. The exercise'll be good for yuh."

He sidled across the room and seated himself in Judge Triwvy's most comfortable chair.

"How long yuh been here?" inquired Enright harshly.

"Me? Oh, I just come. Why?"

"Nothin'. I was just wonderin'."

"That's not a criminal offense, but shiftin' round in yore chair thataway is. Keep still, Enright! Yuh don't suppose there'd be many questions asked if I should drill yuh, do yuh? Judge, make out a warrant for Thomas Johnson. He's charged with rustling cattle and inciting to murder."

Enright gaped. His complete change of expression was almost ludicrous.

"Tom Johnson!" he gasped. "Honest, yuh got him?"

"Shore!"

"Where is he?"

"It's none of yore business, o' course; but seein' it's you, I'll tell yuh he's safe in the calaboose at the Mark."

"At the Mark?"

"Shore! Why the happy laughter?"

For Enright was laughing heartily; but in another instant he ceased

laughing as suddenly as he had begun, and began to curse loudly. To Gilmore's mind, there was a flavor of pretense about those curses. He sensed that the Plain Edge deputy was using them to mask something quite different from the matter in hand, but what that something might be was more than he could fathom. Later he discovered to his intense disgust the cause of Enright's mirth. It also explained the tiny quirk at the corner of the judge's mouth as he wrote out the warrant, and the malice in his eyes as he pushed the warrant across the table.

"I guess the warrant's all right," remarked Gilmore, leisurely folding the document and thrusting it into an inner pocket. "If it ain't, I'll be back, don't worry any about that! It's always a pleasure to call on folks like you two. But I'm afraid next time I drop in one of yuh'll be missing. Not you, yore honor. We can't spare yuh yet a while, but we can manage without Deputy Enright an' not miss a single drink. Enright, yuh hear me talkin' now! To-night, before twelve o'clock, yuh pull yore freight out o' Glenn County, an' nothin'll happen to yuh so far's I'm concerned. Stay here, an' the next time I see yuh, yuh better come a-shootin', 'cause I will!"

"Yuh can't drive me out," Enright snarled.

"I can bury yuh," was the imperturbable reply.

"Talk's cheap!"

"So's lead."

"Say--"

"Shut up! Listenin' to you is shore the hardest think I ever did, an' I don't aim to do it no more. Judge Trivvy, my advice to you is, go slow. Yo're an old feller, an' yuh'd ought to have sense enough to see

that drinkin' yoreself to death is a heap easier'n goin' to jail. Good night, gents, kindly keep those hands up till I'm out o' the doorway. I wouldn't try to give the alarm too soon, either. There's no tellin' how long I may be watchin' yuh from the window."

Backing to the door, Gilmore reached behind him with his free hand and pulled the latch. He slipped silently through the doorway, shut the door, and raced toward his horse. His movements were so swift that a gentleman crouching at the corner of the house had not even time to rise when Gilmore's knee hit him violently in the face and knocked him cold as a wedge.

Gilmore, of course, fell all asprawl, but he was an agile individual, and was on his feet and in full motion in a breath.

The collision with the crouching gentleman necessarily entailed some commotion. Hardly was Gilmore on his feet when there were muffled exclamations from the sides and rear of the judge's house. Followed then the thump of running feet other than Gilmore's. That young man tore loose his reins, made a flying leap into the saddle, and was off toward the river.

CHAPTER XXIII

JIMMY, hot and anxious, met Gilmore in the spray of his crossing. Together they raced westward in the direction of Beardance, swung round the Little Kettle Mountain, and struck out eastward. Half an hour later they dismounted to listen and change horses.

"I can't hear nothin'," announced Jimmy.

"Me either. Guess we must 'a' razzle-dazzled 'em. Stand still, you Frosty fellah! Yuh ain't got a kid straddlin' yuh now. It's me, yuh lump o' sin!"

"I wouldn't want to ride such a sawbuck," asserted Jimmy. "Why don't yuh feed him somethin' once in a while? Maybe the shock'd kill him, but yuh might try."

"Don't yuh fret any 'bout this liT fellah," remarked Gilmore. "He's a reg'lar hoss, he is, all wool an' two yards wide. Naturally, since yuh've been ridin' that wind-busted accordeen of yores yuh can't appreciate a reg'lar hoss. Yuh will when yo're older!"

Three miles from Warrior's Mark they passed a dead horse. The animal had been shot through the back of the head, and a ragged furrow scarred his hide from hip to shoulder.

"Plugged while he was goin' away," observed Jimmy.

"Dead more'n a day, too. Look at the way his legs stick up. I'd shore admire to know how his rider found time to take the saddle off."

"Here's another no saddle, either."

"Drilled through the chest, this fellah was. Maybe the sport ridin' the other one'd know somethin' about it. An' there's a grave. Ain't been filled up long, either."

"Guess we'll find out all about it at the -- Say, ain't that a gent a-hangin' on that cottonwood?"

When they had come close to the cottonwood they saw that the swinging bundle was indeed a man. Rope knotted under the ear, the body swung slowly round and round in the puffs of the fitful breeze; and the features were those of Thomas Johnson, late manager of the Lazy D ranch.

"Thunder!" drawled Gilmore. "I had somethin' I wanted to tell him

before that happened. I wonder what was the matter with Doheny!"

On reaching Warrior's Mark they rode at once to the jail or, rather, what was left of the jail, for the building had been reduced to a few piles of drifted ashes. Two houses on one side and a store on the other had been partially burned. Doheny stepped out of a saloon and strolled toward them. He wore a bandage round his head.

"What's happened?" queried Gilmore.

"A gang o' hold-ups jumped this town early yest'day morning" explained Doheny wrathfully. "They busted in the door o' the calaboose with a log. Then they cavorted off with the prisoners an' set fire to the calaboose. The town came near burnin' up."

"I notice they stopped to lynch Johnson outside o' town a ways."

"That's where we run up on 'em. We got two gents an' a hoss. They played mighty near even by downin' one of our boys, creasin' another, an' lay in' out a hoss."

"Couldn't yuh tell who they were?"

"Every last one of 'em wore a hank'chief over his face."

"I'm bettin' they came from Plain Edge an' Virgin City, too, likely. Have yuh buried the two boys yuh downed?"

"We buried one where he dropped alongside the trail, but the other didn't die right away, so we packed him back to town. He's here in Soley's store. Want to see him?"

"Shore! I might know him."

The dead man, the upper part of his body swathed in bandages, lay

on a table in the back room of the store. The storekeeper was busily sewing flour-sacks into a shroud.

"O' course," said the storekeeper shamefacedly, "it ain't really necessary, but I wouldn't want to have nothin' at all between me an' the dirt."

One glance at the silent dead was sufficient for Gilmore. He remembered well the red hair, the red mustache, the red goatee.

"Now I know why Plain Edge was so quiet the other night, an' why Enright laughed so hearty," said Gilmore. "This fellah belongs to that outfit. His name's Red Hall. I wonder how many from Virgin City an' the V Up-an'- Down was here with 'em!"

Doheny nodded comprehendingly.

"My idea exactly, when I saw how they'd stretched Tom Johnson. You just come from Plain Edge?"

"Yes."

"Funny yuh didn't meet 'em on the trail!"

"I guess they didn't ride the trail. They must 'a' taken the short cut over Packsaddle Mountain. Marshal, can yuh tell us where we can get two hosses? Ours are played out."

"Yuh can have two o' mine. Where yuh goin' the hotel? No, y 'ain't, neither of ye. Yo're a-comin' over to my house. My wife'll be glad to have yuh. It's just about supper-time, too."

When they had eaten, slept the clock around, and eaten again, they said good-by to the hospitable Dohenys, mounted the borrowed horses, and rode off into the northwest. Their destination was the

flag-station of Sandy River on the B. and R. railroad, two hundred miles away.

Jimmy asked no questions on the trip, but he thought a great deal. So did Gilmore. He had made a decision, and he did not know what effect it would have upon the heart of Louise Stuart. None the less he meant to follow the lines of that decision, wherever it might lead.

Sandy River which town consisted simply of a blistered hotel, a blacksmith-shop, two saloons, a few shacks, and the railroad-station and watertank lay sizzling in its basin among the hills when Gilmore and Jimmy rode in. The two were covered with dust, so were the horses, and all were aching for a drink.

In the cool shadow of the tank the agent had built a trough to catch the overflow. While the caked horses plunged in their muzzles, the two men drank deep of the drip at the head of the trough.

"Shore tastes good!" Jimmy breathed ecstatically, rolling his eyes.

"It must," remarked Gilmore. "Yuh sound like yore hoss."

"So would you, yuh long-legged sponge, if yuh had any teeth," countered Jimmy. "O' course, me bein' young thataway, I can't help bein' noisy when I drink. Howsomever--"

Jimmy raised the brimming tin cup to his lips. Gilmore's hand flashed up and forward, and the water went splashing up into his companion's face. Snorting and spluttering, the indignant Jimmy scooped out half the contents of the trough in an earnest attempt to deluge Gilmore; but the latter fled to the comparative safety of the station doorway, from which point of vantage he twiddled his fingers in that world-old gesture of opprobrium.

"I'll getcha yet!" bawled Jimmy, and started to mop himself as his

friend, laughing, disappeared within the station.

"That water's to drink, not to waste," announced a censorious voice at Jimmy's elbow.

Jimmy looked up quickly, his eyes narrowing.

"Is it?" he asked of the surly person confronting him. "What of it?"

"It ain't to waste, I said," repeated the other.

"I know yuh did," agreed Jimmy, laboriously polite. "Yuh've done said it twice now; an' I'm still askin' yuh, Angel-face, what of it?"

Jimmy's right hand, swinging low, was close to the butt of his gun. If his tone had been frosty, his eyes were frostier. The surly person hesitated. Plainly, he did not know whether to risk it or not. The alert Jimmy awaited developments. The surly man suddenly smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. It was a wolfish smile.

"This town is shore gettin' populous," he remarked acridly, and, wheeling, walked briskly away.

"See yuh again, old-timer!" Jimmy called after him.

But the man did not turn. Jimmy watched till the fellow entered one of the saloons; then he chuckled gently and followed Gilmore into the station. His friend was in the act of handing a telegram to the agent.

"Rush her," said Gilmore. "I guess I'll take one o' yore envelopes, an' some paper an' some stamps."

"Help yoreself to the envelopes an' paper," smiled the agent. "They're free, but I ain't got no stamps. Yuh'll have to get them at the store. Here's ink an' a pen an' a blotter all the pleasures o' home.

This telegram—" his eyes skimmed the words "will cost yuh three dollars an' six bits."

Gilmore dug beneath his chaps and produced the required three dollars and seventy-five cents; after which he retreated with the paper and pen and ink to a table in the corner of the room.

Jimmy, sitting on a case of canned tomatoes, noted that Gilmore's letter was extremely short. The missive written and slipped into a long envelope, Gilmore took from the inner pocket of his vest a rectangular document and put it in with the other sheet. Then he unpinned his deputy's star, wrapped it in a piece of paper, and enclosed it with the letter and the document.

"Come on, Jimmy," he invited, thumping down the moistened flap. "Let's go over to the store and get those stamps."

The storekeeper weighed the letter and laconically mentioned the requisite amount of postage. When the two men had departed, he stood hefting the letter in a calloused paw and staring at the address.

"I'd shore admire to know," he muttered, "what kind o' business them two chunkers has with the Governor o' this yere Territory!"

"I've done it," announced Gilmore, as he and Jimmy headed back to the station. "I've resigned. I thought I could fix things up legally, but I've found out it can't be done not in Glenn County. Now we're a-goin' to see what ordinary folks can do."

"Vigilantes!" breathed Jimmy with shining eyes.

"A fellah might call 'em that, but I guess it don't really matter much about the name. The results ought to be the same. That telegram was a call for a few o' the boys."

"A few!"

"Well, twenty-five of 'em, to be exact. I told 'em to buy their hosses at Ringwood, thirty mile east o' here, an' wait for us there; but I kind o' guess we'll be on hand to meet 'em."

Jimmy halted in his tracks. With a wild yell he leaped into the air and cracked his heels together till the spurs rang. Then he shook loose into the atmosphere every load in his gun.

"Wow! Wow! Wow-w-w-w!" screamed Jimmy. "I'm a long-haired, ring-tailed wolf with forty-four rattles an' a button, an' this here is the greatest day in history! Come on an' licker!"

So shouting, he propelled Gilmore into the nearest saloon. It happened to be the very saloon entered by the surly person a few minutes before. The surly one was still there. In fact, excepting the bartender, he was the only customer.

At their entrance he turned, and as quickly turned again to his liquor. Gilmore eyed him idly. He drank off his whisky, hunched his grouchy shoulders, and walked out.

"Stomach don't seem to rest easy," Gilmore drawled, grinning at the bartender.

"He's always that way," explained the bartender. "I dunno why he should be. Got a good job."

"Ye-es?"

"Y'betcha. He's owner o' the Barred O over on Paint Creek."

"The Barred O don't guess I know that brand," Gilmore said without interest.

"She's a new one," the bartender rattled on. "Only started up about two year ago."

"Big ranch?" yawned Gilmore.

"Not so roarin' enormous. Got maybe six, seven hundred head, Mack has."

"That his name Mack?"

"Mack Jim Mack, that's it."

"What for a outfit has he? How many, I mean?"

"Three an' himself mostly. Round-up he hires extra, o' course."

"Shore, he'd have to. Over on Paint Creek, yuh say? Far from here?"

"'Bout twenty mile almost due west, the ranch-house is. Goin' there?"

"It's all accordin'. Can't ever tell what we're goin' to do. Let's drag it, Jimmy."

When they were half-way to the tank where they had left their horses they looked at each other.

"I don't want to go back to Warrior's Mark," Jimmy announced in a drawling singsong.

"We won't," Gilmore assured him. "We're a-goin' to stick around Sandy River. It's just possible we might go fishin' in Paint Creek 'bout twenty mile due west."

"Yep, I guess now that'll be the right place. I hear the fishin's real good over there."

"She'd ought to be."

"Barred O, Barred O real ingenious, I call it!"

"Yo're shore whistlin', James. Let me tell you, it's amazin' what miracles can be done with a heavy iron an' a wet blanket. Did that bartender say six or seven hundred head?"

"He said both. Take yore choice."

"I'd rather take the cattle."

Jimmy laughed uproariously, as at the greatest joke in the world. Truly, the humor of the frontier is often more elemental than subtle.

CHAPTER XXIV

EARLY the following morning the two friends departed from Sandy River, and noon found them leisurely riding the range of the Barred O. The first cow they sighted bore the brand and was grazing in a draw which seemed providential. Between the screening slopes they roped the cow and threw her. Leaving the horses to hold the animal prostrate and quiescent, they dismounted and examined the brand.

Now it is even simpler to contrive the Barred O out of the Lazy D than it is to alter the Hash Knife into the Lazy H-in-a-Circle.

"Those experts shore have a gall!" pronounced the exasperated Gilmore.

"Yo're whistlin'," agreed Jimmy. "But any gents what can turn out work like this shore hadn't ought to 'a' stopped at seven hundred head. It's just as easy to rustle a thousand."

"Give 'em time. They're young yet. I wonder if they're all Barred O!"

"We got all the time there is to find out."

They saw many cows during the afternoon, but all were Barred O.

They rode back to Sandy River to spend the night, and in the morning were out again on the Barred O range. This day they rode the eastern part of the range, and soon came upon a cow bogged down in a water-hole. Gilmore pulled out the unfortunate animal. When they had thrown her and scraped the mud from her hip, they found that the brand was the Barred Diamond Eight. They looked at each other.

"Triangle O," affirmed Gilmore. "Turn her over, an' there y'are."

"She's just too easy," said Jimmy. "The barkeep didn't Say nothin' about this brand, though."

"Maybe he forgot it," suggested Gilmore, freeing the cow. "This seems to be one forgetful country."

Crack! A rifle spoke thinly from a neighboring hill. Gilmore's horse fell to its knees, then collapsed with a grunt. Gilmore promptly crawled behind him.

"Get around into that draw, Jimmy quick!" he ordered.

But Jimmy and his horse had started for it almost at the shot. They reached it safely, although three bullets dusted the ground close to the pattering hoofs. Gilmore, behind the body of his horse, had wormed his Winchester out of its scabbard the poor brute was lying on it and was methodically sending shot after shot into the drifting smoke marking the position of the bushwhacking gentleman on the hill.

The latter was somewhat of a marksman. He planted three bullets in the belly of the dead horse, and once he perforated Gilmore's hat. As the hat jerked Gilmore swore, forjt was a good hat, and had cost him twenty dollars in Santa Fe. He removed his expensive head-covering and tucked it tenderly under the horse's neck.

Then he raised his head slightly for a sight of the enemy, and a bullet filled his mouth and eyes with sand. This destroyed his usefulness for some minutes.

"D'he hit yuh?" Jimmy shouted anxiously from the shelter of the draw.

"Got sand in my eyes an' mouth," explained Gilmore, and swore softly as he almost broke a tooth on a piece of grit.

"Try keepin' yore mouth shut," gibed Jimmy. "If it's a strain, tie a hankercher round yore jaw, like yuh do for the toothache. Say, that feller can shoot!"

"Whatcha think he can do play the organ in a choir? Hit yuh?"

"Missed my ear by a flea's hind leg, the pup! He'll hit somebody yet, if we don't stop him. Git yore field-glasses out, will yuh?"

"Can't they're too far under the hoss."

"Well, I can't see him move, but I know where he is. You keep him busy, an' I'll work round behind him."

"Can yuh?"

"I dunno, but the ground over this way looks like I could. Maybe I can rustle his hoss, anyway. If I do, I'll sell him to yuh cheap, an' throw in the saddle. Is it hot where you are, Dal?"

"No, it's colder'n all Hades! Shut up an' vamose!"

"In a minute, when I get my rifle loaded. Why don'tcha come over here in the draw, an' wait till I get back with this hold-up's hair an' hoss? It's fine an' shady here under this liT cedar-tree. Come on, she's only a hundred yards, an maybe he won't hit yuh. Run kind o' wriggly like, an' yuh'll have a better chance!"

"You tomfool!" called the affectionate Gilmore. "Get a move on!"

"Startin', deary, startin'. Be good while papa's away, an' don't stray out o' the yard!"

Gilmore was devoting himself to the serious business of endeavoring to puncture his hardshooting opponent without being punctured himself.

"Bet that one got him!" he observed half an hour later, when there was no response to his last shot.

He raised an incautious head. Instantly, on the neighboring hill, mushroomed the familiar smoke-puff. It seemed, too, that a gigantic bee had seized that very moment to sting his right ear. Ducking his head with ludicrous haste, Gilmore raised exploring fingers. He brought them away covered with blood. The tip of his right ear was missing.

"Which the range is a good seven hundred an' fifty," he remarked, tying his neckerchief round his head, "an' he comes as close to me as that. An' me, I ain't seen him yet. This is disgustin'!"

Another bullet scored the swell-fork of his saddle. A second drilled his rolled-up slicker through and through. A third bored a cantina.

"First my hat, then me, then my saddle," mourned Gilmore, squirming to his horse's hindquarters for another try. "An' she's only two years old, that saddle. Here's luck to Jimmy!"

He fired three shots in the direction of the bushwhacker and drew a reply. Then he laid down his rifle and rolled a cigarette. He smoked it slowly, taking care to blow the smoke along the ground.

Suddenly he seized his Winchester, snicked the rear sight to six hundred yards, and cuddled down. His opponent on the slope of the hill had suddenly jumped into view, and was seeking a lower altitude as fast as he could run. Ragged swirls of smoke at the top of the hill told the story. Jimmy had arrived.

Gilmore, squinting along the sights, pulled trigger quickly. The fleeing man pitched forward on his face, rolled over, and lay still, his booted legs higher than his head. Gilmore scrambled to his feet, slapped on his hat, and hurried across the flat. Jimmy was standing beside the body when his friend came up.

"Nick yuh bad?" Jimmy asked with concern, at sight of Gilmore's bandage.

"Only the tip o' my ear," the other answered, gazing down at the dead face. "It ain't Jim Mack, after all!"

The dead man looked like any other hardworking cowboy, and there was nothing about him to reveal his identity. Jimmy had discovered his horse in a hollow behind the hill, so they rolled him in his own saddle-blanket and piled rocks on him to keep the wolves away.

"One more down," Gilmore remarked without elation, placing the dead man's saddle on top of the little cairn.

"He won't be the last," said the practical Jimmy. "He shore had a

good red hoss. Look at them laigs, will yuh? Bet he rustled him, even though the brand is Barred O. Aw, don't look so gloomersome! He got what was comin' to him."

"Maybe," hesitated Gilmore, assailed by an uncomfortable thought "maybe he took us for rustlers!"

Jimmy stared.

"Maybe he took us for Mr. an' Mrs. King of England!" he exclaimed with deep sarcasm.

"I mean this here Barred O may be all right," detailed Gilmore. "The brand on that cow was all healed up."

"Aw, say, yuh make me sick!" declared Jimmy, greatly taken aback. "Look at the way that brand was made! Look at the way the edges came together! Y'ain't goin' to let 'em get away with it, are yuh? Why, what'sa matter with yuh, Dal? She's just a plain open an' shut case. An' you ain't a deputy no more," he added significantly.

"We'll see what turns up," returned Gilmore, whose conscience was beginning to trouble him.

CHAPTER XXV

"I JUDGE she's an even break," sagely observed Jimmy, when they were riding eastward. "Tom Johnson rustles cows from the Hash Knife an' V Up-an'-Down, an' they turn round an' rustle 'em from Tom. It's a great game. Got a match, Dal?"

"An' the makin's, an' can't I hold my hat for yuh while yuh light it?"

"Yuh could if there was any wind. What yuh goin' to do about that

Crowner party?"

"Why, I'm goin' to go up an' shake hands with him. What yuh s'pose?"

"I know!" Jimmy nodded gloomily. "Yuh'll give the coyote a chance. I know you, an' that's just what yuh'll do. Here's a plain killer out to beef yuh, an' do you aim to bust him on sight? Not you! I tell yuh flat, Dal, some day yore charitable nature will make yuh sorry a lot, only yuh'll be too dead to know it."

"Every man does things his own way," replied Gilmore. "But you'd give him a chance yore own self. Yuh know mighty well yuh would."

"Not with a skunk like that I wouldn't," stoutly defended Jimmy. "I'd drop him any old way was easiest."

"Maybe yuh'll have the chance. Anyhow, there's no use thinkin' about Crowner now. We won't see him till we go back Virgin City way."

"I dunno. Look at the run o' luck we've had. I know them prisoners was turned loose, but Johnson was hung, so yuh play pretty near even on that; an' they missed us on the trail. That's shore somethin'. Now here we cut the trail o' this Mack party by luck pure luck, 'tain't nothin' else. Nothin' else but that brought us to Sandy River. Luck don't hold forever. We're due for a break, I tell yuh. It may be 'most anythin' a busted laig, a rustled hoss, or Crowner."

"Yo're a cheerful cuss, you are! Yuh always see the silver linin', don't yuh?"

"You wait. You just wait. You'll see."

"Yeah, maybe so. But here's more luck, unless my eyes deceive me. See those cows over yonder by the big rock? Do they limp, or don't they? An' now that we're a little closer, sling yore eyes over the

brands. Barred O an' Barred Diamond Eight, ain't they? An' by the freshness o' the burn, they were branded not longer ago than day before yest'day."

"They're three-year-olds, too," averred Jimmy.

"That red steer next the white cow is a fouryear-old, or I'm Dutch!"

"Limpin' an' poor, all of 'em. They've shore been drove hard an' lately. Ain't yuh satisfied now, Dal?"

"Pretty near."

The two did not return to Sandy River, for the red horse in Gilmore's possession might require explaining, and it was Jim Mack's home town. So they made camp in a draw five miles north of the place.

The evidence against Mack, taking into consideration the time and the place, was not fairly conclusive; but Gilmore was a thorough person. In the morning he borrowed Jimmy's horse and rode to town, where he spent the day making acquaintances. The latter talked more or less usually less. Even so, Gilmore became possessed of the knowledge that the Barred Diamond Eight brand belonged to Mack's foreman, and that the Barred O ranch had started life with twenty cows and eighteen steers.

"Twenty cows an' eighteen steers!" cried Jimmy, when he heard the joyful news. "That was two year ago, an' he's got six or seven hundred head now! That shore does beat guineapigs!"

The next day Gilmore and Jimmy rode eastward in the direction of Ringwood. They did not risk entering the town, but, following their plan of campaign at Sandy River, made camp a few miles outside of the place. As before, Gilmore rode in on Jimmy's horse.

Ringwood, twice as large as Sandy River, boasted five saloons. Gilmore dismounted in front of the Palace. He strode whistling to the deserted bar and called for liquor. His gaze, roving round the room, fell upon a quiet individual sitting in a chair tipped back against a side wall. The quiet individual was Crowner.

The sight of that hawk-nose and hairless face would, under the circumstances, have been a distinct shock to less rugged nerves than those of Gilmore. But Gilmore's eyes swept calmly on round the room and finally came to rest on the face of the bartender.

"Two bits," gruffly announced the latter, mistaking Gilmore's smile for a sign of weakness.

"Two bits back in the hills," corrected Gilmore, "but not on the railroad. A dime a throw, huh?"

The bartender silently swept the proffered dime into the cash-drawer. Gilmore's fingers curved round the glass. His brain was busy pondering the question whether Crowner knew him behind the beard. Had the killer left Plain Edge before Enright or the judge had been able to tell him of the whiskers? It would seem so, for Crowner was evincing not the slightest show of interest, or even of animation.

Gilmore, since taking note of the other's presence, had so maneuvered his body that he could watch him out of the tail of his eye. He consumed an inordinate amount of time in swallowing his drink. Yet Crowner remained motionless. Gilmore was unable to tell where those black eyes were looking.

"Have a drink, stranger?" was Gilmore's abrupt invitation, delivered with his most engaging grin.

"Don't care if I do," said Crowner promptly.

Rising, he sauntered across to the bar. Gilmore treated, Crowner treated, and they had one on the house. Gilmore proposed a game of cards.

"There's only two of us let's make it draw," Crowner suggested in a flat, uninterested tone.

Gilmore immediately seated himself behind a table in a corner, where he had a windowless wall at his back and left hand and his view of the door was unobstructed.

"I don't like to sit with my back to a door," Crowner coldly objected, his eyes fixed on Gilmore's face.

"All right," said Gilmore, instantly changing his seat. "I don't, either. We'll sit sideways to the door. Nothin' fairer'n that, is they?"

Crowner grunted and sat down. They cut for deal. Gilmore won.

Hardly had the first round been dealt when Jimmy entered, looked around, saw Gilmore, turned away his head, and almost galloped to the bar, calling loudly for refreshment.

Gilmore, playing mechanically, wondered greatly what contingency had arisen to bring Jimmy to town. For Jimmy had been instructed to remain in camp, and Jimmy always obeyed orders except when some emergency dictated otherwise.

Having gulped his drink, Jimmy sat down on a chair from which he could watch the door, crossed his knees, and hooked his thumbs in his belt; all with no sign of recognition for Gilmore.

The latter continued to play and to wonder at Jimmy's actions. Crowner played listlessly. He even scooped in his winnings draggingly.

Not for a single instant did Gilmore relax his vigilance. When Crowner 's hands, in the exigencies of play, moved beltward, Gilmore's followed suit. At the end of twenty minutes, with Crowner's first hostile move yet to be made, Gilmore concluded that the killer did not know him, and determined to force the issue.

"Might I ask yore name?" he inquired.

"You might," Crowner parried, his blank stare telling nothing.

"I'm askin'," pursued Gilmore, his cards face down on the table, his finger-tips lightly touching the wood.

"Well, it might be 'most anythin'," countered the unhelpful Crowner. "Was yuh real interested in knowin' ?"

"Shore."

"Might yuh be a sheriff or somethin' like that?" Crowner's thumbs were hooked in the armholes of his vest.

"Yo're shore a hard man to get anythin' out of," Gilmore complained. "I was just askin' so as to help yuh earn some money."

"Money?" The lean lips curled in a smile. Gilmore nodded.

"Quite a lot o' money. But yuh'll shore earn it, fellah!"

"Fellah!" Here was the height of calculated rudeness. Crowner's mouth straightened to a slit. His right shoulder moved -upward ever so little. He silently inspected his fellow player.

"My name," Gilmore said with a deadly gentleness, "is Gilmore Crowner!"

Crowner did not move a muscle at the announcement. He simply continued to stare.

"Yuh see, Crowner," explained Gilmore, "I was outside the window listenin' the night Enright an' you an' the judge had yore little conference up in Plain Edge. I'm just tellin' yuh who I am so's yuh could earn the rest of yore wages!"

"Now that's what I call bein' polite," Crowner declared smoothly. "I'm grateful to yuh. Them whiskers are shore as deceivin' as a bandanna over a road-agent's face. I dunno but what I like the bandanna better. Yore impulsive friend there has pulled his gun," he added fretfully.

"He won't shoot," Gilmore assured him. "Yuh see, he don't know yuh like I do. Likely he thought yuh weren't worth givin' a chance to. Maybe he's wrong, maybe he's right. Anyhow, it'd pay yuh a whole lot to sort o' keep yore eyes on me instead t)f lookin' to see what my friends are doin'."

"Don't yuh worry none about me not keepin' my eyes on yuh," said Crowner. "I could tell he pulled his gun 'cause I heard his holster shiftin'. He'd ought to tie it down, like I do mine."

"He might need to if he was in yore business," flashed the counter, pat and pithy. "Anyhow, you an' I are wanderin' off the range. I take it yuh believe in windin' up a business matter prompt an' right away?"

"The sooner the quicker," agreed Crowner.

"Then the rest is easy. We can lay our guns handy on the table, start playin' cards again, an' grab our guns whenever we feel like it; or we can take off our artillery, clamp our left hands together, an' go to carvin' with our knives. If yuh ain't got a bowie, yuh can borrow one some- 'eres. Or else yuh can go out in the street with me, walk away

a hundred yards, start back, an' set yore gun a-goin' whenever yuh feel like it."

"I don't care nothin' about that knife business," Crowner declared with emphasis. "Lay in' our guns on the table, or shootin' it out in the street they both listen well. But while I'm thus walkin' away from yuh in the street, how do I know you or yore friend won't plug me?"

Gilmore's eyes blazed; then he smiled. "Yuh'll have to take my word that yuh won't be plugged. If yo're still worried, yuh can back away the whole hundred yards; then yuh won't have to take yore eyes off me. Which is it in here or out there?"

"Let's finish our game," suggested Crowner.

Gilmore nodded. The two watching each other with the keenness of nervous cats, slowly dragged out their six-shooters and laid them on the table within easy reach.

"Say," exclaimed the bartender, speaking for the first time, "I wish you gents, would go out in the street. I don't like gun-fights in here!"

"Shut up!" snapped Jimmy. "This ain't none o' yore battle."

"I tell yuh--"

"Yuh'll tell me just less'n nothin'. An' don't go reachin' for no sawed-off shotguns, neither. Go right on arrangin' them bottles an' glasses, an' keep yore paws in plain sight!"

The card-players had paid no attention to the verbal contretemps. The deck was cut, shuffled, and dealt with a tranquil serenity worthy of the best gambling-house in Cheyenne. Seven times the deal changed hands. The soft shuffle of the cards on the table was answered from behind the bar by the scrape and clink of glassware

as the bartender complied with Jimmy's orders.

Gilmore had coldly calculated the chances in this card-and-gun duello, and had concluded that he was running the lesser risk. The longer the game lasted, the greater would be the strain on the players, and Gilmore knew that his own steel nerves were proof against any tension. He had no knowledge of the state of Crowner's nerves, but he was betting that they were not on a par with his own. His belief was well founded, for Crowner was his elder by a good ten years, and in such a grim game as this the odds are on the younger man.

Suddenly, on the eighth deal, as Crowner was on the point of picking up his hand, the bartender dropped a bottle. Whether the sharp crash unsteadied taut nerves, or whether Crowner judged that the decisive moment had arrived, will never be known. It is history that at the sound of the breaking glass his right hand moved lightninglike toward his gun; but his speed was overmatched by an uncannier, swifter legerdemain. His fingers had barely touched the butt of his sixshooter when he sighed deeply and fell forward across the table with a round, blue-bordered hole in the middle of his forehead.

Gilmore flipped up his smoking revolver and ejected the empty shell. Unhurriedly he drew a cartridge from his belt and inserted it in the empty chamber. He slid the gun into its holster and rose to his feet.

"Come on, Dal," urged Jimmy, already at the door.

"Say, y'ain't goin' to leave that remainder here for me to bury, are yuh?" tremulously remonstrated the bartender.

"He's got money," said Gilmore, jerking his thumb at the dead man, whose face lay among the scattered cards. "An' he hasn't any heirs leastwise, what money he's got sort o' belongs to me in a way. I don't

want it. It'll pay for his buryin', easy, an' yuh can have what's left."

Gilmore passed out of the barroom in Jimmy's wake. Under the eyes of the curious they walked along the street, Gilmore leading his horse.

"We got to drift," were Jimmy's first words.

"Why?"

"That blame red cayuse. I'm settin' there on my blanket rollin' a pill, a little while after you left, when a long sharp on a short hoss sifted into camp. 'Howdy,' says he, an' borries matches. Out o' the side of his eye I can see he's takin' in the red hoss an' the Barred O brand. Now he come into camp from the west an' he rode out to the east all right, but that look in his eye was funny; so I clumb up on that little hill south o' camp an' watches the jigger. Shore 'miff, he fetches a half-circle round camp an' drags it west- 'ard like he had a sick wife or somethin'. By the way he was streakin' it, he'd ought to be in Sandy River pronto--"

"Where'd yuh leave the hoss?"

"I tied him to a post behind that corral at the near end o' town. He's pretty dusty, anyway, an' I muddied up the brand at the ford, so I guess there ain't no chance o' his bein' recognized unless somebody knows him real well."

"You better wiggle along back to yore hoss while I buy some grub."

"Get some makin's an' chawin' too. I'm near out, an' we'll be dodgin' a posse now for a week or ten days till the boys get here."

CHAPTER XXVI

FOR three days Gilmore and Jimmy pushed their horses to the limit of the animals' endurance. They rode in the water, they rode on rocky ground, they doubled on their tracks, they swam the wide Belleflamme nothing was left to chance.

"I guess we're safe for a spell," observed Gilmore on the morning of the fourth day.

"We'd ought to be," said Jimmy. "We're a hundred and fifty mile north o' Ringwood, an' we've made a heap o' trail two hundred mile, anyway."

So that day they rested themselves and their horses on the edge of a wooded plateau, and the following morning Gilmore awoke to see a band of twelve riders in the valley below. The horsemen had halted and appeared to be debating. They were barely a mile distant.

Gilmore and Jimmy did not remain for breakfast. They flung the saddles on their horses and crossed the wooded plateau at a gallop. Again they were compelled to twist and dodge and have recourse to the water and the hard ground.

Once, while passing through a canon, they were fired at from the top of the cliffs. The hidden marksman emptied his magazine, but shooting downward makes for overshooting, and all the shots went high. Other rifles took up the tale before the two fugitives could get out of range, but fortunately the marksmanship did not improve.

Luck continued to be with Gilmore and Jimmy. To reach the floor of the canon the pursuers were compelled to make a fifteen-mile detour. By the time they had covered the fifteen miles, the pursued were well on their way elsewhere and still going at a good gait.

It is not necessary to recount how Gilmore and Jimmy spent the

ensuing ten days. Let it suffice to say that they rode hard, slept little, and ate less. They covered a deal of broken country, and saw no further signs of their trailers. On the eleventh day they swung southward, and early one morning, two weeks after their hasty departure, they rode into Ringwood. Their action was not so bold as it appeared, for they had reconnoitered the town during the previous night and found that which they sought.

A lanky young cow-puncher standing in the hotel doorway squinted his eyes at the two approaching riders.

"Here they come, boys!" he flung over his shoulder in a delighted tone, &nd stepped out into the street with a loud yell of welcome.

From the hotel poured twenty-four cow-men. They were of all ages, all sizes, and, judging by their bellowings, in excellent spirits.

"They're shore a great crowd," observed Gilmore to Jimmy.

"Ain't they, huh? Look at Big Art, all dressed up like King Solomon's pet pony, an' Dakota he's wearin' two guns. Hello, Dakota, when djuh get here?"

"Oh, we been here a month," came the reply from the sidewalk. "I'd 'a' married an' settled down if you fellers hadn't pulled in to-day."

"Yep," bawled Big Art, "Dakota has the gal all picked out. Fine-lookin' lady she is. She don't weigh an ounce more'n three hundred, an' yuh'd never know she was Injun in the dark!"

Dakota was immediately thumped by every one able to reach him.

"Quit it, can'tcha?" shouted Dakota. "Lemme alone, or I'll shore step on somebody's face with both feet!"

At this juncture the town marshal, followed by three set-featured citizens, was crossing the street in the direction of Gilmore and Jimmy. The latter, who had dismounted, promptly slipped behind their horses. The twenty-five cowpunchers, sensing the unusual, lined up along the sidewalk. The marshal and his retainers halted in the middle of the street. Their hands were held well away from their gun-butts.

"Yuh seem to have found friends," the marshal said harshly; "but lemme tell you two gents, it won't do yuh a bit o' good. Nobody can run any blazers in this town an' get away with it. Where djuh get that boss?"

"Which one?" Gilmore drawled in a gentle tone.

"The Barred O cayuse."

"Oh, shore, the Barred O! That would be the one yuh'd want to know about, wouldn't it? Well, I'll tell yuh I got that boss from a rustler down on the Barred O range. He shot my pony, the rustler did, so I downed him,, and took his boss. Yuh can't ask for nothin' fairer'n that, can yuh?"

The marshal blinked. The situation was unusual, and he seemed to find it difficult to collect his wits.

"Do yuh admit killin' the puncher?" he blurted finally.

"Rustler, fellah, rustler," was the soft-voiced correction. "Just one o' the rustlers o' the Barred O ranch, that's all. We're a-goin' up there now, my friends here an' I yeah, all those fellahs yuh see on the sidewalk an' we're a-goin' to ask Mr. Jim Mack a few questions. Then we're a-goin' to stretch Jim Mack an' his men. Yuh see, those Barred O cows were all rustled from the Lazy D, over beyond the

War Ax. If you prairie-dogs weren't blind as bats, yuh'd 'a' seen it. Djever see the Barred O brand on a cow? 'Tain't any thin' like the brand on this here cayuse. This boss brand is cle ar enough, but the cow brand is rough-lookin' -- a little flat on the sides, an' about twice as big as it ought to be. Two year ago Jim Mack started the Barred O with twenty cows an' eighteen steers, an' now he's got six or seven hundred head. There's an increase for yuh that'll stand lookin' into, an' we're a-goin' to do it, an' nobody's goin' to stop us, either!"

"Who are yuh, friend?" demanded the marshal.

"Dal Gilmore, an' my main business in life is the ropin' of rustlin', so now yuh know. Better not start anythin', marshal! There's twentyseven of us here, an' even if the whole town chips in it won't help you an' yore three friends any. But I'm always willin' to help folks out. If you ain't satisfied, marshal, s'pose you trail along with us when we go after Mack, an' find out for yoreself. We're a-goin' this mornin'. Take as many friends as yuh like we don't care."

"You needn't go after Jim Mack he's right here in town," the marshal announced with a grim smile. "He's down at the other hotel, him an' two of his men. I sent a man for him just as soon as I seen you fellers."

Gilmore's gun was out in a flash.

"Nds up!" he snapped. "Not a move out o' yuh! You sport with the black hair, don't try to slide over behind the marshal! That's it, stay right in sight. Yuh say Jim Mack an' two of his men are here. Where's the rest of the posse?"

"The other nine went back to Sandy River last night," was the sulky reply.

"Oh, they did, huh? All right, we're a-goin' down to the hotel to see Jim Mack, an' yo're a-goin' with us in front!"

But when they had surrounded the hotel, and Gilmore and Jimmy and a few others had entered and searched the building, they were reluctantly forced to believe the landlord's statement that Mack and his two men, after viewing through a window the enthusiastic reception accorded Gilmore and Jimmy in front of the other hotel, had hastily departed corralward by way of the back door.

"An' the way they lit out o' that corral wasn't a bit slow," the landlord said in conclusion.

"We're gonna trail those gents," Gilmore told the marshal, "an' I don't care whether yuh like it or not. They got away 'cause I spent too much time explainin' things to you. Now do we go peaceable, an' will yuh give me yore word not to bother us?"

"Yuh've done held me up" began the marshal.

"Yo're lucky to be able to say so," drawled Gilmore. "What's the answer?"

"They's somethin' funny about all this here," grumbled the marshal.

He and his three companions had been relieved of their guns, and their tempers were ruffled in consequence. To make matters worse, the whole town was looking on.

"Yuh can just bet there is," Gilmore agreed, "but yo're too dumb to see it. Quick now speak up!"

The marshal gave a surly promise for the good behavior of himself and the town, and the sixshooters were returned. Inside of fifteen minutes the twenty-seven were riding out of Ringwood on the trail of

Jim Mack and his two companions which trail led them westward.

They rode without a word, as befitted men about to visit vengeance on the evil-doer. They also rode in a manner calculated to ease their mounts as much as possible. Where the trail of the three forded a small stream, they halted to water the horses. Gilmore eyed the opposite bank, its shelving slope marred by deeply cut hoof-marks.

"They ain't far ahead of us," Jimmy remarked.

"They're close," asserted Gilmore, splashing across and leaning down from his saddle. "Here's one mark just fillin' up with water."

This bit of information set the posse in instant motion. Within the hour they sighted the fugitives a mile ahead. The three must have been riding chin on shoulder, for they immediately separated and galloped in different directions.

"We'll keep after the middle one!" Gilmore shouted above the rolling thunder of the hoofs.

They kept after the middle one tight after him. By the time the scattered buildings of Sandy River came in sight, the range had been reduced to four hundred yards, and the pursued was turning about in the saddle and firing rearward with a rifle. Good marksmanship under such conditions is impossible. Gilmore, Jimmy, Big Art, and Dakota bent low over their saddlehorns and encouraged their weary ponies with quirt and spur.

These four men, owing to the superior quality of their horse-flesh, were far ahead of the other members of the posse, who were strung along the back trail at all distances up to five miles.

"If he gets in among the houses, it'll be a hard job to pry him out!" yelled Gilmore. "Pull wide o' me! I'm a-quin' to try a shot!"

Gilmore drew out the Winchester from under his right leg and dragged his horse back on its haunches. He swung from the back of the sliding, stiff-legged brute, ran forward a few steps to get out of the dust, and dropped on one knee. The rifle cracked. At the report the fugitive's horse collapsed in the middle of a leap. The animal fairly stood on its head, flinging the rider a good twenty feet before crashing over on its back.

Gilmore caught up his reins, mounted, and galloped to where Jimmy, Big Art, and Dakota were already grouped round the fallen man.

"Head hit kind o' hard," observed Big Art. "Outside o' that, he's good as new."

"It's Mack, Dal," Jimmy said quietly.

Gilmore nodded with satisfaction. "I was thinkin' he might be the one in the middle!"

They all dismounted and squatted down on their heels to await the unconscious man's recovery of his senses. The sweating, duststreaked horses stood with drooping heads. They had a right to be tired. The thirty miles between Ringwood and Sandy River had been covered in better than three hours.

"Here comes Long Jack an' the Kid," remarked Gilmore, squinting along the back trail at two madly quiring horsemen.

Long Jack, a snub-nosed puncher, and the Kid, a youngster of eighteen, rode up as Mack opened his eyes.

"No use feelin' for yore gun," drawled Gilmore. "Y' ain't got it."

Mack made a sound deep in his throat. His eyes shifted.

"Fellah," went on Gilmore dispassionately, "yo're caught. Yo're due to be stretched, like any other rustler; but I know yuh ain't alone in this deal. Tell me who's behind yuh, an' yo're free to hop the next freight."

"Yuh got me all right. Hang an' be damned!" The words were brave enough, but the voice was not quite steady.

"Yuh see," drawled Gilmore, "yore friends have deserted yuh. To save their skins they'll put it all on you. They will, certain shore, when they know yo're too dead to mind it. But yuh don't have to die, Mack. No, sir, yuh can scamper aboard the next freight, just like I say, an' away yuh'll go free an' foot-loose. O' course yuh can't ever come back, but I guess yuh won't want to. There's nothin' funny about bein' stretched, Mack. It hurts some, an' it hurts worse if the knot slips. Yuh've seen men hung, I take it. 'Member how they kicked?"

Evidently Mack had seen the supreme punishment administered, for he squirmed. The muscles in his cheeks bulged. He was gritting his teeth in a tremendous effort to keep his nerve and his counsel.

"Sometimes it takes as much as five minutes for a man to cash," the inexorable voice continued. "An' sometimes he gets his hands loose an' grabs the rope over his head, an' yuh've got to do the business all over again. It ain't pleasant. Are yuh goin' to make it hard for us, Mack? Are yuh?"

Mack dragged himself to a sitting position. His hands were trembling. His eyes refused to meet squarely the eyes of his captors.

"Yuh ain't got no evidence," he whispered with dry lips.

"No? Long Jack, yore rope looks to be nearly new. Unstrap her, will yuh? One o' those cottonwoods down by the river'll do, I guess. Come on, Mack get on yore feet!"

Mack jerked his shoulder to shake off the hand laid upon it.

"I'll tell yuh," he breathed hoarsely. "Yuh'll give me yore word to let me go, won't yuh?"

"Yuh have it," Gilmore replied simply.

"Jack Shaw, of the V Up-an'-Down, is the boss of this show," said Mack. "'Twas him an' his men rustled the cows from the Lazy D an' Triangle O an' drifted 'em north to us."

"Where'd yuh rebrand 'em?"

"We didn't rebrand 'em at all not here, that is. Jack Shaw's boys 'd do it right after they rustled 'em. By the time the cows 'd get to me the brands 'd be 'most healed up."

"We found some a while ago that weren't healed .up. They were Barred O an' Barred Diamond Eight eight of 'em, steers an' cows."

"I shore forgot them. They was overlooked by the V Up-an'-Downers, an' we had to brand 'em ourselves. I was kind o' scared somebody'd notice it, an' I was a'most minded to kill 'em for beef. Wisht'had!"

Mack's thin upper lip lifted in a sneer. Under the promise of immunity his fear was disappearing and his habitual sulky surliness was taking its place.

"Yo're shore nobody but the V Up-an'-Down outfit was in this rustlin' from the Lazy D?"

"I'd ought to be shore. I tell yuh nobody but my outfit an' the V Up-an'-Down are in on this deal here. O' course old Alec Stuart done some brand-blottin' on the Lazy D cows, but he kept all he rustled on his

own range. Aw, what's the difference? Every ranch in Glenn County is rustlin' from the next one. It's a fair enough game. The losers are the boys who get beefed, an' they're paid for that, so there y' are!"

"I reckon yore usefulness here is about over," snapped Gilmore. "Get up!"

"Say, yuh promised yuh wouldn't hang me!" Mack cried in alarm.

"No more we will, yuh poor fool," was the reassuring answer. "We're a-goin' to take yuh to the railroad-station an' see yuh off on the next freight."

Passing through Sandy River they were met by the other members of the marshal's posse, who had ridden homeward the night before. These men were citizens of Sandy River, and, while not openly hostile, it was obvious that they were grimly determined to arrive at the true inwardness of matters.

When Gilmore had explained the affair, and Mack had brazenly corroborated his statement, the Sandy River men called loudly for the rope. They had been fooled; badly fooled, and the lynching of Mack would at least partly restore their self-respect. Gilmore, however, explained quite frankly that Mack was to take the next train, and that any attempt at violence would meet with disaster.

;< I gave him my word," he told his hearers. "Yuh can easy see how it is."

They saw, and their spirits fell accordingly, but they brightened again when a thoughtful soul among them suggested that they might ride out to the Barred O and call upon the solitary puncher left in charge.

"That's a good idea," said Gilmore. "If one or two o' yuh could sort o' look after the Barred O till this cat-hop's settled, we'd take it kindly."

They assured him earnestly that they would, these whole-souled Sandy River citizens, and hastened to the corrals. Gilmore and his men went on to the station.

An hour later a west-bound freight, pulling in, had not clanked to a stop before Jim Mack was hastily scrambling up the caboose steps.

"An' that's the last o' him!" observed Jimmy cheerfully, as the long train drew away from the station.

"It is for us," Gilmore returned without exultation. "Let's be movin', boys. As it is, I dunno but what those two rustlers'll get to Plain Edge ahead of us."

Gilmore was now in a fair way to accomplish his mission, but the knowledge did not bring contentment. He did not see how, in all fairness to the other rustlers, the shooting or hanging of Alec Stuart and his six sons could well be avoided; and Louise Stuart could not be expected to view with equanimity either their elimination or their eliminator.

Yet Gilmore was not in the least disposed to turn back. He had started the business, and of necessity he must see it through. His creed would allow of no other procedure. His heart was very sore as he and his men journeyed to Plain Edge. Truly, there are times when the way of the reformer rivals in rocky hardness that of the transgressor.

CHAPTER XXVII

THEY struck the trail from Warrior's Mark to Plain Edge half-way between the two towns, and turned into it. Within ten miles of Plain Edge they met the Fort Henderson ambulance up to its wagon-box in

the quicksand of Tom's Creek.

"Yuh'd ought to 'a' hung to the ford," called Gilmore, and unstrapped his rope.

"The dam' mules ran away," was the driver's sufficient explanation.

With five ropes to a wheel, and seven on the tongue, the ambulance squashed out of the quicksand and lurched up on dry ground.

"We're shore obliged to yuh," the driver said, on behalf of himself and the two dripping and muddied troopers. "Goin' to the trial?"

"What trial?" Gilmore inquired, and picked up his reins.

"Why, the trial o' Smoky Nivette, in Plain Edge. We'd 'a' stayed, only we had to get back quick an' right away with the colonel's express packages. Great man for express packages, the colonel is, an' he's always fuller'n a goat the next day. I dunno--"

"Djuh say Smoky Nivette was bein' tried in Plain Edge?" interrupted Gilmore, the others crowding closer.

"Shore, for the murder o' Red Hall. It's a shame, too. He didn't kill Hall no more'n I did. Red was dropped in a fair fight; but them V Up-an'-Downers an' the Hash Knife, they kind o' make the law up thisaway."

"Are both outfits in town?" The calm tone was no gauge of Gilmore's seething anger.

"Shore, they're both in town, 'ceptin' Stuart an' his boys."

Gilmore did not grasp the full significance of the latter part of the sentence, for his brain was busy with the possibilities embodied in the first part of it. Waving his men to follow, he spurred into the water.

On the opposite bank he checked his horse.

"Boys, she's come to a show-down quicker'n I thought," he said to the eager-faced crowd surrounding him. "One o' my friends, if that muleskinner told the truth, is due to be lynched. I dunno the rights of it, but I know Nivette. If he killed anybody, it was because he was crowded, an' the other fellah got an even break all right. Anyhow, he didn't down Hall. We've got to stop this lynchin'. Seein' that the V Up-an'- Down's in town, it'll be a large order. It's just possible somebody else might like to help fill it. Jimmy, s'pose you an' the Kid drag it for the Mark, an' tell Doheny an' the rest o' the bunch what the driver told us. Tell him right now ought to be as good a time as any for them to play even for gettin' their jail burned."

"Send Big Art an' the Kid," Jimmy protested. "I don't want to go to the Mark."

"Oh, shore, send me!" bawled the indignant Kid. "Just 'cause I ain't as old as the rest o' you gran'pops, yuh think I got to do all the dirty work, an' let the rest o' yuh have all the fun. Send--"

"Shut up!" ordered Gilmore. "You prairiedogs don't seem to realize that while yo're bellyachin' round Smoky Nivette is liable to swing. Jimmy, you an' the Kid do as I say. A mile east yuh'll come to a dry wash. Here, anybody got a pencil an' a piece o' paper? Old envelope's all right. That's it! Crowd over here, Jimmy, an' I'll explain this short cut over Packsaddle Mountain while I'm drawin' a map for yuh."

Five minutes later Jimmy and the lid were heading toward Warrior's Mark, while the others were riding hard in the opposite direction.

"They'll shore hurry," observed Dakota, spurring up beside his chief.

"Y'betcha," replied Gilmore. "An' yuh can gamble that Mark outfit'll come back with 'em."

The long hitching-rail in front of the log-and-frame court-house in Plain Edge held a kaleidoscopic double fringe of switching, stamping cowponies. These nervous brutes were the only visible signs of life when Gilmore and his men rode in. Dismounting in the rear of Shorty Damman's hotel, they tied their mounts to the corral stockade and proceeded on foot to the court-house, within which building, to judge by the babel of voices, a hot argument was in progress.

Gilmore jerked out his gun and walked briskly through the doorway, his men crowding at his heels. As by magic the clamor hushed. Every face was turned toward Gilmore. In the dead silence the inadvertent scrape of a boot-sole jarred intolerably.

Smiling his fixed, peculiar smile, Gilmore gazed round the court-room. He noted the position of Jack Shaw and Slim Dennison, who sat side by side close to the jury-box. He saw that Shorty Damman and several of his friends, all heavily armed, were sitting on the bench nearest the handcuffed half-breed. Gilmore's smile became more fixed, and, if anything, a trifle more peculiar.

"Howdy, Smoky?" he drawled, when the silence had become almost unbearable. "Were you needin' any help?"

"Not now, by gar!" grinned Smoky.

The blear-eyed, trembling judge cleared his throat. He beckoned to two men wearing deputies' stars.

"Clear the court-room!" said Judge Trivvy.

The two looked at Gilmore and his twentyfour men, now occupying strategic positions along the wall. The deputies did not move to obey

the judge's order. Gilmore laughed.

"I guess, yore honor," he remarked, "this court will stay the way she is. An' Mr. Shaw an' Mr. Dennison will stay the way they are. An' so will their outfit. Quit it, you fellah in the red shirt! It ain't necessary for yuh to get up. If yo're thirsty, yuh can wait till the session's over with. Try an' sit still. Remember, this is goin' to be strictly legal. I ain't a deputy any more, so there's nothin' official about this mornin' call. We're here as visitors, nothin' more'n that, but I can't say what'll happen if any misguided sport goes after his hardware. I mean you,, Shaw, an' you, Slim! You two will be downed first pop, to say nothin' o' quite a jag o' fellahs sittin' on these back benches. Shore, I know there's forty or fifty o' yuh, corral count, an' yuh may rub us out in the end, but there won't be many o' yuh left alive to celebrate!"

At this point a woman who had been sitting on one of the front benches rose and rushed up the aisle. It was Mrs. Kyle.

"Don't let them hang him!" she cried, clutching Gilmore's sleeve. "They wouldn't take my testimony. I came here to tell them that Smoky Nivette was in Virgin City the time Red Hall was killed. Anyway, everybody knows Hall was killed in the fight at the Mark. The charge against Smoky is perfectly ridiculous. They want to hang him, that's all! They wouldn't even listen to Mr. Damman."

"Don't you fret," comforted Gilmore, patting her on the shoulder. "There's goin' to be a whole heap o' listenin' done from now on. You better go back to yore seat now. Yore honor, the jury has not gone out. Yuh haven't charged 'eni yet, have yuh?"

Judge Trivvy was unable to articulate, but he managed to answer with a shake of the head.

"I'm glad o' that," Gilmore said gravely. "S'pose we all listen to what

Mr. Damman has to say, if the district attorney has no objection."

The red-nosed district attorney had no objection. At any rate he uttered none, for he seemed to be as fear-stricken as the judge.

Shorty Damman got on his feet. In the hollow of his right arm he held a double-barreled sawed-off Greener.

"I want to say," declared the wispy one, sliding his chew into the corner of his cheek, "I want to say what I been try in' to say all mornin'. I know Smoky didn't shoot Red Hall, an' nobody knows it any better'n that crowd that went to the Mark an' burned the calaboose. Yuh might as well accuse Smoky o' downin' Abe Lincoln, an' be done with it. This here is a short-card game, an' you fellers know mighty well it is. An' I want to say right now what I've said before that me an' my friends come here this mornin' to see justice done, an' we're a-goin' to see it done, or this session o' the Glenn County court will wind up in the smoke!"

"Hooray!" incautiously bawled Big Art, and immediately, with great presence of mind, ordered Dakota to keep quiet.

Gilmore stilled the momentary flurry among his followers, and turned to the judge.

"Yore honor an' the jury," he drawled, "yuh've heard what Mr. Damman had to say. S'pose we listen to the testimony o' Mrs. Kyle. I know yuh've all heard it once, but maybe yuh weren't listenin' real hard the first time. Gettin' nervous, Dennison? Yore friend, Tim Simms, knows what happens to nervous folks. Has the end o' his thumb grown back on again? All right, Mr. Attorney, call the witness when yo're ready. What? There ain't any lawyer for the defendant? This don't look legal a little bit! Yore honor, yuh've overlooked a bet. I'd appoint a lawyer, if I were you."

The judge rose to the occasion sufficiently to assign a lawyer to the accused. The designated counsel, who hated the district attorney, promptly called his witness. Mrs. Kyle testified in a clear voice that on the day Red Hall was shot Smoky Nivette spent the time from 6:30 p. M to 1 A. M. playing cards in her saloon. At the conclusion of Mrs. Kyle's testimony the defense rested its case.

The district attorney and Judge Triwy were at their wit's end. The looks that Shaw and Dennison bent upon them were shriveling their lickspittle souls. Nor did they find inspiration in Gilmore's set smile. They feared for their currish lives, these two men of law; and they had reason.

"Speak up, Mr. District Attorney," urged Gilmore. "The jury's gettin' tired waitin'."

The jury, composed wholly of V Up-and- Down adherents, did not look in the least weary. On the contrary, its twelve members appeared as alert as so many weasels. This may have been due to the fact that the jury-box was so situated that, should hostilities occur, the bullets missing Shaw and Dennison would inevitably find lodgment among the jurors.

The district attorney stood up. He swayed on his feet, striving manfully to speak, but he was past speech. He could only guggle. He sat down.

"There, now, that's what I call a right sensible oration!" Gilmore declared admiringly. "He didn't say a word too much not a word. Yore honor, ain't it about time to charge the jury? Shaw, sit still!"

"This this is coercion!" bleated Judge Trivvy.

"Don't mind 'em," warmly advised Gilmore.

"We're here to see fair play, old-timer; so you go ahead an' do the right thing, an' they will, an' we will. What more do yuh want? Fly at it!"

Wretched Judge Trivvy, fear clutching his nut-gall of a heart, charged the jury in a voice so low and wavering that Gilmore was compelled more than once to request him to speak louder. Gilmore found no fault with the charge. It was eminently fair-minded. But when the jury rose to file out for their deliberations Gilmore offered decided objection. He did not trust those jurors.

They appeared to be capable of almost any act of treachery.

"But a jury al'ays wrastles it out in private," protested the foreman.

"Yuh can be as private as yuh like behind that rail," Gilmore informed him. "Lemme tell yuh plain, fellah, what I said to the spectators goes for the jury. No gent leaves this room till I say so, 'ceptin' he leaves feet first!"

The jury looked helplessly at Shaw and Dennison. The harried pair returned the look as helplessly. The jurors debated not a great while. They cast their ballots in the foreman's hat. As might have been expected, the verdict was "Not guilty."

When Smoky Nivette had been released, and his weapons returned by the deputies, the V Upand-Down and their Plain Edge friends arose and pushed for the door.

"I haven't given the word yet!" cried Gilmore. "Before yuh go out I got somethin' to say."

The crowd halted.

"See here," shouted Shaw, shoving his way to the front, "yuh can't

keep us here forever! We--"

"Close yore face," interrupted Gilmore, "an' keep yore Bands away from yore belt. You an' yore boys'll be free as air in less time than it takes to saddle a hoss, but now yuh got to listen. Yore bein' in front o' me thisaway makes it easier for me to speak my little piece. I shore do hate to talk about a gent when he's hidin' behind a lot o' other men!"

Shaw's lips paled, and his fingers twitched, but he refrained from going after his gun.

Gilmore never took his eyes from Shaw's reptilian countenance. He realized that never, from the time of his entry into the court-room till now, had the moment been so tense, so fraught with hair-hung sudden death.

"Remember, you tin-horns in the back," Gilmore reminded them, "that yore friends here in front will shorely be among the missin' if just only one o' you fires a shot. An' another thing yuh've maybe forgot: Shorty Damman an' his friends are behind yuh, an' Smoky Nivette has his guns back!"

The hostile crowd, still outnumbering the combined forces of Gilmore and Shorty Damman, yet barked to the speaker's combined impudence and common sense, and stifled its seething emotion. Decidedly, the hour was Gilmore's.

"Yuh was goin' to say somethin'," Shaw exclaimed feverishly. "Spit it out!"

"Sorry to keep yore highness waitin'," drawled Gilmore. "I just wanted to tell yuh that yo're a hoss-thief an' a rustler, an' y' ain't fit to eat with a sheepman."

"Yo're a liar!" cried Shaw, his hand dropping.

"Put 'em up!" flashed Gilmore, instantly shoving his gun into Shaw's abdomen. "Don't yuh know any better'n to try to pull a gun on me?"

Slowly Shaw's fingers uncurled from the butt of his six-shooter, and slowly his arms went up and bent inward the edges of his hat.

"Yo're shore one leisurely gent," was Gilmore's dry comment. "Lucky for you I got a whole lot o' patience. What do yuh say, Shaw, to you an' me an' yore dear friend an' foreman, Slim Dennison, goin' into the street an' shootin' it out? Bein' the better man myself, it's only fair to make it two to one."

"Yo're on!" barked Slim Dennison from far back in the crowd.

Shaw nodded evilly.

"I'll go yuh, Gilmore. This Territory is shore too small for you an' me!"

"That's the first sensible thing I ever heard yuh say. Got yore rifles, you an' Slim?"

"Rifles?"

"Shore, we'll settle our little difficulty with rifles, the conditions o' this gun-play bein' that we all go out into the street together, each party backs off a hundred yards, an' then walks toward each other, settin' our artillery a-goin' whenever we feel like it."

"I ain't got mine with me," objected Shaw.

"It's on yore saddle. Don't try to tell me yuh come here without it. Yuh can get it when we go outside, which'll be after I get my Winchester. Dakota, would yuh mind gettin' my rifle for me?"

When Dakota had returned from the corral with the rifle, Shaw and Dennison flatly refused to precede Gilmore through the doorway. They would not go outside and leave their men inside, and that was all there was to it. In this sentiment the men loudly joined.

Again the moment became touch-and-go; but it passed without a break, and, following a short argument, the two recalcitrants led the way as requested. Gilmore's friends were the next to leave. Gilmore himself went out last.

CHAPTER XXVIII

As Gilmore, in the middle of the dusty street, moved backward, his friends on the sidewalk naturally drifted along with him till he stopped opposite Shorty Damman's hotel. Two hundred paces distant stood his opponents, but not side by side. Shaw was almost touching a large boulder in front of the express office, while Dennison slouched beside a freight-wagon backed up to the opposite sidewalk. The two men were at least thirty yards apart.

Gilmore, while fully expecting some wily and guileful action on the part of his enemies, had not counted on their separating in this manner. He knew that he had only himself to blame for not foreseeing such an obvious and logical move. Yet he was not disheartened, though the odds against him in this desperate game were manifestly heavy.

He took a step forward, his faculties in readiness for the quick and fancy shooting that the exigencies of the occasion would presently demand. Shaw instantly dropped behind the boulder, Dennison slipped behind the freightwagon. The pained and amazed Gilmore emptied his magazine into the fortifications of his now invisible enemies and ran for the shelter of the hotel. He knew what was

coming next.

It was not long in coming. Bang, bang, bang! A Winchester cracked thrice in the doorway of the court-house, and three bullets cut the dust behind Gilmore's flying heels. He speeded up and entered the hotel full jump, neck and neck with the proprietor.

As a wet sponge in the hand of the scholar erases the pencil-marks from the slate, so did those first three hysterical shots clear the main street of Plain Edge. Inside of thirty seconds the town looked as it had when Gilmore and his men rode in. The only living things in sight were the ponies in front of the court-house.

No outburst of firing followed the three shots. Instead, a heavy silence hung over Plain Edge. The V Up-and-Down forces, the sudden move of their leaders taking them by surprise, had no time for concerted action before their opponents were under cover, and busily making good that cover by all the means in their power.

The positions of the rival bands were about equal in strength. Gilmore's men, together with Shorty and his friends, held the hotel, three corrals, two stores, and half a dozen of the houses near the hotel. Across the street were several houses and shacks, the jail, and a storehouse belonging to a friend of Damman's. Except the storehouse, they were all poorly built and would not stop a questing bullet.

Farther up the street, a hundred yards from the storehouse, from which it was separated by open ground and a large corral, stood the courthouse. Beyond the court-house all the shacks and houses and there were a round score of them were owned by V Up-and-Down sympathizers.

The street itself, after the cheerful fashion of streets laid out by men

unhampered by strict regard for property lines, was a wide one, but of assorted widths, running from a scant thirty-five yards in front of the express office to a long forty between the hotel and the storehouse.

"Le's go in my store," a friend of Shorty Damman's suggested to Gilmore, Smoky and Shorty. "She sticks out ten feet beyond the front o' the hotel, an' there's a window on the side toward the co't-house, so's yuh can shoot straight out stead o' slanchways."

Shooting straight out being preferable to shooting "slanchways," the three followed the storekeeper, Shorty Damman delaying only long enough to exchange his short shotgun for a sixty-caliber Sharps.

"Shotgun's all right for close to," observed Shorty, patting the stock of the long eight-square, "but for searchin' out an' borin' through a gent any ways off, gimme this here buff 'ler gun!"

Besides its invaluable window, the store possessed other attractions, such as heavy log walls and a long counter. They knew nothing of the art of Vauban, these four Westerners, yet in their crude, uncultured way they contrived a more than passable traverse out of the counter by piling sacks of flour upon it. To the end that the whiteness of the sacks should not draw fire, they covered them with a tarpaulin.

"I shoot left-handed," announced Sam, the storekeeper; "so I'll take one of the front windows."

"Dere ees a hole here between de log on de corner," grinned Nivette, lying down on his stomach. "Un I have one fine lookout at de court-house. By gar, eef I can geet dat Shaw I do not care w'at happen or Sleem, burn hees soul!"

Nivette thrust the muzzle of his rifle level with the opening, his swarthy

cheek cuddling the stock. Gilmore and Damman, at the side window, squinted through their sights and waited patiently. The former seized the opportunity to clear up a question which had been puzzling him for some time.

"I don't see Enright around," said he.

"He's been got," explained Damman.

"Who got him?"

"Alec Stuart an' his boys."

"When did it happen?" Then, when Damman told him, Gilmore added: "Why, that was the night I hit town!"

"You?"

"Shore I came in to get a warrant from Judge Triwy."

"An' the Stuarts come to get Enright."

"An' they'd 'a' got me, if I'd stayed a minute longer! I've been a-wonderin' who the gent was I fell over as I was goin' out Judge Triwy's door!"

"They got Enright yuh seen them two new deputies an' the judge went off in a faint. Guess they thought they'd killed him. Anyhow, it 'd 'a' saved a heap of trouble if they had. I s'pose a feller can't expect everythin'. Can yuh scrouge over a little?"

"Shore! How's that?"

"Fine for the money. Have a chew?"

"Not for liT Willie. I'll roll me a pill when my magazine's empty."

"What gets me," said Damman, "is how them Stuarts an' Enright happened to fall out. They used to be thicker'n cold molasses; but I did hear there was some trouble about cows over to Fort Henderson."

"I guess maybe there was," Gilmore drawled. "I guess maybe there was!"

The wisp-like Damman scratched an ear with his trigger-finger and grinned expansively.

"It shore beats hell how part o' the world ain't big enough for some people," he remarked sagely. "They got to go try in' to hawg it all then o' course they gets planted, an' nobody's more surprised than they be theirselves. Yuh'd think them four ranches 'd learn sense."

"One of 'em's a-learnin' fast now."

"Yo're shore singin' a true song! Well, she had to come some time, an' it might as well be now, an'"

Bang! Gilmore's Winchester cut short the sentence. Simultaneously a bullet chucked softly into the traverse and a cloud of white dust puffed out, to be followed immediately by a trickling stream of flour.

"Plug her, Shorty, will yuh?" called the storekeeper. "It's such a job scrapin' her up off the floor."

The obliging Shorty complied with the request, employing for the purpose a Sharps shell.

"Djuh get him?" he asked of his partner.

"I dunno," Gilmore replied. "It was just the point of his shoulder I saw."

"Which I can't see him at all," complained Shorty. "I can't see notliiri! Say, there's somethin' movin' see, down there near the corner o' the big corral. Anyhow, there's a crack there, an' the edge o' the co't-house shows through it. No, it don't show now!"

Shorty's buffalo gun roared. When the smoke cleared away, the marksman, to his satisfaction, perceived the corner of the court-house through the crack in the stockade of the large corral.

Shorty's shot seemed to have aroused the enemy. Promptly, from the windows and partly opened doors of the court-house and the buildings beyond, there issued quick-winking orange flashes and gray smoke. Gilmore, working his lever with such speed that the reports burred like the roll of a drum, threw ten shots through the court-house door. Somebody made haste to close the door. The horses tied to the hitchingrail, terrified by the spurts of flame and smoke in their vicinity, sat back on their haunches, tore themselves loose, and fled in all directions.

"That's good!" observed Gilmore. "Now they can't get away on 'em."

Shorty, aiming carefully, was boring the planking beneath the sills of each court-house window in succession.

"Al'ays told 'em they'd ought to build that o' logs all the way up, 'stead o' just the foundation," observed Shorty. "But no, they had to put on more dog than a shave-tail lootenant, an' use planks. The judge he plumb insisted on 'em. If he's in there now, I bet he wishes he'd took my advice!"

Gilmore, when next he reloaded his Winchester, told his three companions of the Barred O ranch and the activities of Shaw in that

direction.

"I ain't surprised," said Damman, shaking his head; "but it strikes me yuh was shore actin' charitable to offer a stand-up fight to them two rustlers, Shaw an' Slim. They'd ought to 'a' been plugged any old way."

"My idea exactly. That's why I got 'em to go out in the street so's I could shoot 'em any old way. S'pose now I'd blatted out inside there all about the Barred O. The fracas would 'a' started right then, an' we wouldn't 'a' had a chance. No, sir, I had to try an' get 'em away from their friends. They're the brains o' that crowd, those two. Once they're rubbed out, the rest o' the outfit won't last much longer'n a small drink in a big town."

"Dirty kyotes!" interpolated Sam, the storekeeper.

"You was shore takin' a long chance," observed Damman. "S'pose them two Barred O punchers got here before you did then what?" "Well, I had to risk that."

"If they float in here later we'll attend to 'em."

"It don't matter an awful lot what happens to 'em. Durin' to-day an' to-morrow rustlin' in Glenn County is shore due to receive a bad setback. I guess maybe I forgot to tell yuh I sent two o' my men to the Mark, to tell them what was doin' an' invite 'em over."

"Which yuh shore did forget to tell that! The Mark, huh? That's good hearin'. They'll be over all right, or I don't know Doheny!"

"They'd 'a' been over before, only the job was a leetle too big for 'em to swing," remarked the storekeeper. "But now, with yore bunch o' fighters, Mr. Gilmore, it's like bettin' on a shore thing. They can't lose."

The storekeeper fell back, clutching his arm. A bullet had ripped his right forearm from wrist to elbow. Almost crazy with pain, for the missile had grazed the funny-bone, the storekeeper danced up and down and called down the i most terrific curses on the heads of those in the court-house. He was bandaged by Damman, and after a space went back to his window. Between rumbling strings of oaths he began again to reduce the architectural value of the courthouse.

"I wish we could get into that storehouse across the street," Damman said.

"We'll get into it to-night," Gilmore told him.

"If they don't get there first!"

"They won't, you'll see. Lord, listen to those shots from the corral! That fellah don't care how many shells he wastes. Must be Big Arthe always was the spendthrift boy. Who's got the buffalo in yore hotel? She's been a-goin' off every so often."

"My cook. He's Scotch, an' never wastes a shell."

Save that of the cheerful shooter down by the corral, there was now very little firing in proportion, at least, to the number of men engaged. There was certainly nothing of the spectacular about the fight. Both sides were waiting for the coming of night to enable them to work in closer.

This being the case, it was not to be wondered at that Gilmore, Nivette, and a dozen friends, entering the front door of the storehouse in the last of the twilight, surprised several gentlemen crawling in through the rear windows.

Gilmore's little force promptly went into action with such vigor that the

enemy was unable to retain a foothold in the place. He retired, leaving one dead in a jack-knife position across a window-sill, and, judging by the swearing, carrying two wounded.

But Gilmore's men had not escaped scot-free. Nivette had a furrow along his scalp, and Big Art was dead. Under the sheltering overhang of a counter, Gilmore lit a match and held it over the quiet face.

"Plumb in the forehead," he said. "He never knew what hit him. We'll make 'em pay for it. You were shore one good fellah, if there ever was one!"

CHAPTER XXIX

LEAVING eleven men to barricade and hold the storehouse, Gilmore took Nivette and scouted out to the stockade of the big corral between the storehouse and the court-house. Crawling along on hands and knees, he butted head foremost into a silent citizen coming the other way.

Although a many-starred constellation pinwheeled before his eyes, Gilmore managed to reach out and grip the other man by the neck. Nivette, desirous of taking part in the festivities, plunged forward. Gilmore thought for an instant that the stockade had fallen on him, but it was only the half-breed scrambling along his spinal column.

Ship-chuck! A knife flipped down and pinned Gilmore's shirt and a fold of skin to the ground, and somebody stuck a thumb in his eye. Squirming with pain, he struck out with the barrel of his Colt and very nearly ruined Nivette's knuckles.

Simultaneously a hand seized a generous handful of Gilmore's hair and wrenched strongly. This time the arc described by his six-

shooter ended at the back of some one's head. The hand pulling Gilmore's hair relaxed, and he felt the throat he was gripping go limp. The head fell forward over his wrist.

"By gar," whispered Nivette, "my hail' ees shore done for! Dees feller ees one good fightair!"

"That was me hit yore hand," grunted Gilmore. "I thought it was that fellah's head. Take one of his feet, will yuh? We'll drag him in."

Jarring reports smashed the silence as several rifles in the court-house began to flash. Bullets spatted into the ground, ricocheted with shrills, buzzing whines, or smacked into the posts of the stockade.

"For Heaven's sake, git a move on!" besought Gilmore, a missile having gone through his hat.

Crouching, taking tremendous steps, holding their captive by an ankle apiece, they dragged him round the corral to the storehouse. Boosting him through a window into the hands of the others, they followed.

"Who is it you've got there?" queried the town blacksmith.

"I dunno," replied Gilmore. "He shore put up a hard fight! He nigh blinded my eye, an' tried to knife me, but only got a small piece of skin. Then he pulled out half my hair, an' Smoky comes along an' uses my back for a road. I'm sore all over!"

"My hand," observed Nivette, wigwagging his fingers in the darkness, "ees all same bust. I can wiggle de fingair no more."

"Ow, my head!" groaned a new voice the voice of the captive.

"Dakota!" exclaimed Gilmore.

"Shore, Dakota! Who'd yuh think it was? What fell on me? What happened anyway?"

"I thought you were one o' the other fellahs," explained Gilmore.

"So you done it, huh? Well, if this is the way yuh treat yore friends, I don't want to be yore enemy, none whatever! My head's busted. What did yuh hit me with a ax?"

"Only my gun."

"Only yore gun! Only yore gun! Yuh might think she was a powder-puff, the way you talk. Only yore gun! I tell yuh I'm mighty lucky if I don't have brain fever or somethin'."

"Yuh couldn't ever have brain fever," Gilmore assured him; "so yuh don't need to fret."

"Oh, couldn't I? That's all you know about it. Yuh needn't think, 'cause yo're you, yuh got a mortgage on all the brains in the county. What do yuh think I was doin' out there by the corral, huh? I was comin' in from spyin' on the court-house that's what I was doin'." ,

"Good for you, Dakota! What did yuh find out?"

"I found out they're plannin' to burn this storehouse. Leastwise, they was all talkin' about it when I left where I was hidin' underneath the window. Feller come along an' near stepped on my face. I shore thought I'd have to shoot him.

Then maybe liT old Dakota never would 'a' come back."

"What else did they say?"

"Nothin', 'cept that the wind bein' just right when they set fire to the storehouse the sparks 'd go across the street and set fire to the hotel."

"Well, God bless their lovin' hearts!" exclaimed Shorty Damman.

"They don't like yuh none at all," said Dakota gravely.

"Come on! We got to stop their fireworks display," remarked Gilmore, "an' the only place we can do it is outside. An' next time yuh got to go rampagin' round at night thisaway, Dakota, you let us know ahead o' time."

"You can gamble I will," was Dakota's fervent response as he tenderly felt his aching head. "Yuh needn't be afraid to drop anybody yuh see or hear. I was the only one out."

"They must shore be drunk," whispered Shorty Damman to Gilmore, when the two were outside. "They's a lot o' Plain Edgers among 'em. Don't they know the whole town'll go?"

"Seems like they don't. But the whole town won't go not if we know it!"

Followed by Nivette, the two crawled over to the corner of the corral. Crouching beside it, they prepared to make life exciting for any one injudicious enough to attempt the firing of the storehouse. At the opposite corner of the corral were posted Dakota and three men. The others lay a few yards out from the storehouse wall.

"Listen to them fools in the hotel," said Shorty;< They're firin' again, an' there ain't nothin' to shoot at. I know it."

"Must be doin' it for company," suggested Gilmore. "No, they ain't, either. Hear those other rifles? They sound kind o' muffled, like they

was way off. They ain't comin' from the court-house. They're--"

"They're behind the string o' shacks on the same side of the street as the hotel that's where they are!"

"Yo're whistlin' an' there's some more on the other side o' the hotel outside o' town."

"They's good cover behind a cut-bank about three hundred yards beyond the last shack," said Damman.

"That's where they are. They're aimin' to surround us!"

"It looks like they done it, too," Shorty gloomily observed.

"Wait till that crowd behind the cut-bank sees Jimmy an' his mob ridin' in," returned Gilmore, not discouraged. "They won't be expect in' that!"

"I hear somet'ing!" came in Nivette's cautious whisper.

They listened. In the darkness beyond them some one was undoubtedly moving. Suddenly there was the sound of a slip and a smothered curse.

"Crawlin' in, an' cut his hand on a busted bottle," grinned Gilmore to himself, and tossed up his six-shooter. Following the bunched reports there was an instant scurry of pelting feet, diminuendo. "Hear 'em hit the grit!" he chuckled, as he ejected the empty shells. "There was more'n one."

"Four," said Nivette, jamming cartridges through his loading-gate. "I do not t'ink we geet any, but we scare dem."

"They know we're watchin' now. They won't come again."

They did not come again, but they endeavored to set fire to the corral.

"They are drunk," remarked Shorty. "Fire that corral, huh? She was only built three weeks ago, an' the wood's so green she wouldn't burn on a bet. There, she's flickerin' out. Ain't even enough light to shoot by."

"They're behind the stockade, some of 'em," said Gilmore. "What ain't there are huggin' cover too close to do us any good. If I can only get one shot apiece at Shaw an' Slim that's all I want."

"Dey are mine, dem two fellers," said Nivette softly, "un, by gar, I weel tak' deir hair, me!"

"Yo're shore welcome, Smoky," declared Gilmore. "After all, they do belong to you more'n they do to anybody else."

The dawn brought a brisk resumption of firing. It also brought unexpected reinforcements in the shape of a dozen horsemen. These riders were fired on by the force behind the cut-bank. Replying with promptness, they chased the bushwhackers to the cover of the shacks opposite the court-house, and dismounted behind the hotel corral.

"That was shore no trouble at all," the hardfaced leader of the newcomers informed Gilmore. "I hope the rest's as easy. Two fellers we met yest'day afternoon said the V Up-an'-Down an' the Hash Knife was pullin' Plain Edge to slivers, so we come to sweep up the pieces; but there don't seem to be no pieces."

"There will be with yore help," Gilmore observed significantly.

"My idea exactly! Between the lot of us we'd ought to lay over them

jiggers like a big blanket over a small bed. My name's Kling."

Mr. Kling and his friends, it seemed, were inhabitants of Warrior's Mark. They had been riding out on business the business happening to be the pursuit and capture of a horse-thief when they had met Jimmy and the Kid. Jimmy's story had brought them hotfoot.

"Which that hoss-thief was just swingin' clear o' the grass-blades when yore two friends rode up," said Kling. "They said they was on their way to the Mark. Ten minutes either way an' we'd 'a' missed 'em, 'cause we hadn't come by the trail an' we didn't figger on goin' back by the trail. Providential, I call it."

Gilmore quite agreed with the engaging Mr. Kling, and related, over a Kentucky breakfast, the true tale of the Barred Diamond Eight ranch on Paint Creek, near Sandy River.

"Well, I shore do admire a hawg!" pronounced Kling. "Which lynchin' is too good for that feller Shaw! He'd ought to be drug to death. Djever stop to think how he might get away?"

"He won't," affirmed Gilmore. "He'll stick. He's got sand."

"His sand may be part chalk," said the doubtful Mr. Kling.

Following the advent of the newcomers there was a more or less brisk exchange of shots. Toward noon it became desultory, dropping, on the part of the enemy, to not more than ten or twelve shots in the hour. But when Jimmy, the Kid, Doheny, and forty-two citizens of Warrior's Mark arrived in the middle of the afternoon, Shaw's outfit began to waste ammunition in scandalous fashion. They saw the beginning of the end.

CHAPTER XXX

Six hundred yards in rear of the court-house a long, shallow draw paralleled Plain Edge's main street. It was an excellent position from which to enfilade the court-house and the row of shacks and houses on its flank, and Gilmore had only been prevented from circling the town and occupying it by a lack of men. Now, with a large force at his disposal, he promptly posted Doheny and thirty willing fighters in that draw.

"We'll jump 'em to-night," Gilmore told Jimmy and Damman.

"Fine!" said the wispy hotel-keeper, drawing a plug from his boot-leg and biting off a large chew. "I ain't as young as I was twenty year ago, but I don't mind gettin' in where it's warm once in a while. Djever stop to think how maybe they'll get away on their bosses?"

"They can't," Gilmore replied. "Most o' their bosses ran out o' town."

"Most o' theirs did, but there's others in them corrals at the far end o' town next to them last two shacks."

"They won't get away on 'em," declared Gilmore. "Jimmy an' a few o' the boys'll be hangin' round those corrals."

That night was clear too clear. The starlight enabled the watchers at the court-house windows to see several dark shapes moving toward them. The watchers fired their Winchesters. Instantly there broke out on the front, side, and rear of the court-house a furious chatter of gunfire. The sharp crack of the Winchester was answered by the heavier report of the Colt's "Frontier."

Thud! Cr-r-rash! The butt of a log battering-ram shivered and smashed the door of the court-house. In through the splintery opening drove a torrent of men, shooting as they came.

The fighting in the court-house was over within four minutes. When the few prisoners had been tied with their own lariats, Gilmore reloaded his reeking six-shooter and led the way into the street, where, to judge by the inferno of noise, a good-sized skirmish was in progress.

The gray smoke hung in the air like fog. Through it stabbed the level orange flashes of the guns. Men met death each after his own fashion there under the stars.

Shorty Damman's bartender had an alarmclock, and its hands indicated 12:55 A. M. when the last shot was fired. The bartender could not see what time it was, however, for he was too far under the bar; nor had he any means of knowing that the battle was over. So he stayed where he was till many men stamped into the barroom and bellowed for liquor.

"A good half of 'em got away," mourned Jimmy, squeezing his glass as if he feared it would also escape him.

"About twenty or twenty-five," corrected Gilmore. "It can't be helped. Anyhow, I don't guess they'll hang around Glenn County a whole lot."

"By gar, Sleem un Shaw dey shore geet away," growled Smoky Nivette, pushing his way to Gilmore's side.

"I know," nodded his friend. "I went over everythin' careful with a lantern. I guess they made it, all right."

"How many djuh lose, Dal?" asked Shorty Damman.

"Two gone out an' eight nicked an' grazed in various ways."

"We lost one an' three hit, countin' Sam, who was nicked the first day. The Mark crowd here's Doheny! What did they do to yuh,

Doheny?"

"Three down," replied Doheny, "an' five hurt."

"Nothin' the matter with that," said Kling, a bandage concealing the major portion of his hard features. "Eleven of 'em cashed, I counted seventeen creased, an' there's eight prisoners. If the river was nearer town there wouldn't so many have got away. That an' them two-way corrals was what helped 'em."

After breakfast in the morning a party of grave-faced men accompanied the eight prisoners into the fringe of cottonwoods on the river-bank.

Half an hour later the grave-faced men returned without the prisoners. It was then that Judge Trivvy, tremulous and white-faced, sought out Gilmore.

"I am delighted that you won," remarked the old rascal. "The man Shaw and his evil crew have long been thorns in my side. By threats of bodily violence they compelled me to do as they wished. I thank Heaven that the menace of their presence has been removed. I trust, sir, that you will follow up the good work. Shaw and Dennison may return; but I am sure you will know what to do if they should."

Gilmore could only gape at the ancient rogue. Such barefaced assurance was almost unbelievable.

"I trust that you bear me no malice," quavered the judge. "What I did I did under compulsion you must remember that."

"Shore, I'll try to remember it," agreed Gilmore; "but it'll be some few of a strain on my memory. Yuh see, the night I got the warrant for Tom Johnson I'd been listenin' under yore window a little longer than I let on. I heard yuh hire Crowner to down me."

Judge Triwvy appeared to curl up on himself as a green shaving curls in a hot blaze.

"O' course, old-timer, yo're a dog an' a rat, an' y'ain't fit to talk to," Gilmore informed him pleasantly; "but yuh maybe can be useful to me. If the Governor or Uncle Sam asks any questions about this night's work, you'll know how to tell 'em there wasn't any real trouble at all, won't yuh? An' yuh can make that drunken bummer of a district attorney keep paws off, can't yuh?"

"My dear sir, you may resfeassured" began the judge eagerly.

"I guess I may rest assured that yo're goin' to be one good liT boy from now on," coolly interrupted Gilmore. "So long's y'are good an' try to please me by livin' honest an' judgin' cases on their merits, an' keepin' yore mouth shut about what's best forgot, just so long yuh'll be able to stay out o' Leavenworth."

"Leavenworth!"

"Y'betcha! Not for tryin' to have me rubbed out, but for conspirin' with Enright an' Oyle o' the Fort Henderson agency to swindle the gov'-ment on the beef issue see?"

The judge saw. So well did he see that he even managed to greet with a smile a perturbed captain of cavalry who called upon him an hour later.

"What has happened?" inquired the officer.

"Happened? Why, what do you mean?"

"The fight, of course."

"What fight?"

"What fight? What fight? Didn't a crowd of gun-fighters try to wipe out the town last night?"

"No, captain, no. I have heard of no such occurrence."

The captain stared. Then he ran a finger round the inside of his collar and gulped.

"Judge," he said earnestly, "early this morning a scared tin-pedler drove into camp and said that Plain Edge was being shot to pieces. I rode here with my troop at once. And you say there has been no fight! Why, the door of the courthouse has been smashed in, the front of the building is full of bullet-holes, and there are eight dead men hanging in the cotton woods at the head of the ford!"

"Oh, those men yes, of course. No wonder you're puzzled, but you needn't be. It's really very trivial indeed. A party of strangers fell to quarreling among themselves. Some of the bullets went a little wild. That accounts for the holes in the court-house."

"But it doesn't account for the dead bodies hanging in the cottonwoods, or for the number of bandaged men on the street!"

"Well," replied the judge, in an extremely dry tone, "some of the bullets didn't go wild."

With which explanation the captain was forced to be satisfied.

CHAPTER XXXI

MEANTIME Gilmore and his men, accompanied by Mrs. Kyle and a delegation of Plain Edge and Warrior's Mark citizens, were riding to

Virgin City. Some of those who ran from the Plain Edge fight had also taken the trail to Virgin City; but they were not there when the posse arrived. According to Mrs. Kyle's bartender, they had passed through with as little delay as possible. The marshal had joined them, as had several other undesirables of Virgin City.

"How many hours ahead are they?" asked Gilmore.

"'Bout four hours," was the bartender's reply.

"They was more'n eight hours ahead when we started," put in Jimmy.

"We'll change bosses an' keep a-goin'," said Gilmore.

They kept going, but so did the bad men of Glenn County. As was to be expected, the pursuers found that the pursued had split into groups of three or four and scattered in widely divergent directions. Gilmore promptly divided the posse into three sections, assigned a trail to each, and renewed the pursuit.

In Gilmore's section were Jimmy and Smoky Nivette. The latter, reputed to be the best trailer in the Territory, rode beside Gilmore, his swarthy face alight with the wolf-lust of the best hunting in the world the hunting of man.

It was the half-breed who was the first to glimpse seven horsemen against the greenybrown of a distant hillside.

"They can't be what we're chasin'," said Gilmore, glasses at his eyes. "They're shore comin' this way too fast."

"De sun ees een deir eye," asserted Nivette, "un we are een de shade o' de pine-tree wood. Dey cannot see us."

"By the way they're ridin' they'd ought to come right near these here

trees," Jimmy suggested hopefully, drawing his Winchester from the holster under his leg. "That steep slope is bound to throw 'em this way."

"This is about as good a place as any to wait for 'em," nodded Gilmore. "Come on, boys we've got to get the bosses back in the trees."

Twenty minutes later seven horsemen debouched from a valley a mile away. They had halved the distance when, even as Jimmy had said, the steep slope of a hill turned them almost directly toward the ambushed posse.

"It's old Stuart an' his boys," Gilmore remarked quietly, and closed the glasses with a snap. "Don't shoot unless yuh see 'em begin to crowd me. I'm goin' out to talk to 'em."

"Don't be a fool!" exclaimed Jimmy, but Gilmore was already up and strolling nonchalantly into the open.

In the longhorn country a man afoot is an unusual sight. It is even a suspicious one. The seven riders, now not more than four hundred yards distant, drew apart, and three of them reached down for their rifles. Not so Alec Stuart. The old man rode steadily forward.

Gilmore stood still, his right hand raised in the peace sign. He was smiling his peculiar smile. His bright blue eyes revealed no hint of that which troubled him a lively fear that Stuart and his boys would lose their heads. The last thing he wished was to have one of them stop a bullet.

Alec Stuart and his sons halted their horses in front of Gilmore. There was a glint of triumph in the old man's eyes. Lanky, the young Lucifer, grinning a grin of vindictive malice, began to unstrap his rope. The

other sons stared with frank hostility.

"Yuh shore ought to 'a' stayed in them woods," observed old Alec. "I don't think yuh'll get away this time!"

"Which I should say not!" exclaimed Lanky, and swung to the ground.

Gilmore did not move. His smile became a trifle more fixed. His thumbs remained hooked in the armholes of his vest.

"I wouldn't do nothin' rash," he suggested in a very slow drawl. "S'pose yuh take a squint to yore left an' a little back."

Bob, the youngest boy, turned his head. The others did not remove their eyes from Gilmore's face. With a precociously lurid imprecation, Bob slid his Winchester back into its holster.

"What's the use?" he said rather faintly.

Old Alec flashed a look over his shoulder. At the edge of the wood sixteen men were standing. All had rifles, and all the rifles, while held in various positions, were pointing in the general direction of Stuart and his sons.

The old rustler's shoulders hunched forward, and his six-shooter muzzle gaped at Gilmore. Gone was the erstwhile triumph in his eyes. They were ablaze with fierce anger.

"If a shot's fired, you'll be the first to die!" he barked.

"Yuh make me plumb sick," declared Gilmore. "Honest, if yuh had six times as much sense, yuh'd be half-witted. Don'tcha use that head for anythin' besides roundin' off yore neck?"

The veins in the aforementioned neck swelled alarmingly. Gilmore

eyed death down the barrel of Stuart's long six-shooter.

"I know how yuh feel," he went on easily. "Yuh'd admire to fill me so full o' lead I'd rattle, but don't be a bigger fool than yuh are. Go ahead, old-timer, cuss away! Maybe I'll hear somethin' new."

"Shut up!" snarled the sunny-tempered Lanky. "I've a good mind to take a chance an' knock yore horns off right now."

"That's for you to decide, fellah; but remember, I could 'a' bushwhacked you sports dead easy with the accent on the dead. I come out here to talk to yuh, hop in' yuh'd be sensible an' listen like humans. I s'pose it's almost too much to hope, ain't it?"

"Go on!" grated old Stuart. "Well, first maybe yuh can gimme some information. Have yuh met any gents that was goin' some'eres else in a hurry lately? We're huntin' three."

"Whadda yuh mean?" demanded Bob. "Why, nothin', only a crowd of us sort o' had a run-in with the V Up-an'-Down up at Plain Edge, an' a good many of 'em were downed. We hung eight after the fight. Some got away, an' we're lookin' for 'em, like I say."

Old Alec licked his lips; Lanky spat upon the ground; but none of the Stuarts said anything audible.

"How comes it I didn't see you fellahs at the trial?" Gilmore asked.

"Huh!" snorted old Alec. "I ain't none in favor o' gettin' rid o' folks that way. There's too many other ways o' doin' it besides goin' to law as yuh'll prob'ly find out!"

"I expect. Now listen to me. I've busted the V Up-an'-Down, an' I won't be able to sleep easy till Shaw, Slim, an' Tim Simms are either stretched or run out o' the Territory. So, as I like my sleep, it's a cinch

those three fellahs are goin' to do some hard ridin' for a while. But that ain't really what I aimed to tell yuh. Yuh got Enright, didn'tcha? An J there's been a kind o' slump in beef -issue cows an' raised vouchers ever since. Enright an' Oyle weren't the only ones in that deal, but who the other was don't matter. It wouldn't help yuh to know, not any. To keep on our ramblin' way, Tom Johnson o' the Lazy D has been lynched. First an' last a whole jag o' gents have gone out. Rustlin', oldtimer, has been rode to a whisper unless certain sports choose to wake her up. There's plenty o' range in Glenn County. It ain't necessary to start new ranches, like Shaw did with the Barred an' the Barred Diamond Eight. Yeah, djever hear o' those brands? Well, it don't matter, none whatever. As I was sayin', what happened at Plain Edge needn't happen again. That is, it needn't if rustlin' stops; but rustlin' has got to stop, an' it's goin' to stop if we have to use every rope in the Territory. Yuh might tell yore friends, if you have any. Yeah, I know the Triangle O an' the Lazy D have been a heap careless 'bout other folks' cows, but I kind o' think they'll listen to reason now. In fact, I know they'll have to. Well, I got to be weavin'. Glad I run up on yuh. I've been wantin' to see yuh for some time. So-long!"

"You've had yore say," old Stuart said between his teeth, "an' now I'll have mine, young feller! The best thing you can do is to get measured for yore coffin. Yuh'll shore be needin' it one o' these days. You hear me?"

:< Help yoreself," smiled Gilmore, and, turning, walked back to his friends.

Silently he mounted his horse and as silently took up the trail of the fugitives.. Inwardly he tingled with shame; for he had done that of which he had never for an instant believed himself capable he had actually shown leniency toward rustlers; and all because he loved a feminine relative of the rustlers. The fact that his warning had been

flouted and would certainly be disregarded did not tend to diminish the enormity of his offense in breaking the law of the range.

"If I'd 'a' known fallin' in love meant all this muss" he thought, not realizing that the aforesaid muss was responsible for his falling in love. But he did not complete the sentence. "What would yuh do?" he demanded of himself instead. "What would yuh do, huh? Yuh'd do it all over again that's what yuh'd do!"

Jimmy and Nivette wondered what their companion was smiling at, but neither made any comment.

"Cloudin' up," observed Gilmore, within the hour.

"Beeg storm," Nivette contributed briefly.

An hour later the storm broke. Nivette had spoken the truth. Slickers were soaked through in less than twenty minutes.

"No use goin' on," pronounced Gilmore wriggling his clammy shoulders. "Sign all washed away."

"Shore," said Nivette. "Un dey know eet. Eef dey have sense, dey make heap of trail while de storm last un I t'ink dey have sense, me."

So the posse rode back to Virgin City. Gilmore, unsaddling at the hotel corral, felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned. The station-agent was holding out a letter. Gilmore took it, glanced at the superscription and promptly felt his heart bump its way up into his throat; for the address was in the handwriting of Louise Stuart.

"Well, he might 'a' said somethin'!" grumbled the agent as the wordless Gilmore plunged forward to the shelter of a freight-wagon tilt.

CHAPTER XXXII

BUT Gilmore was oblivious to all the world. Opening and spreading out his letter, he read it with a careful intensity that the few lines it contained did not seem to warrant.

This was the letter:

DEAR MR. GILMORE:

My father and my brothers will not be home for a week. The boys are all out on the range. If you receive this before the nineteenth, I wish you would come to see me. I have something of the utmost importance to tell you.

LOUISE STUART.

Gilmore took from his pocket the wellthumbed letter brought by Smoky Nivette on the occasion of his taking Slim and the marshal to Plain Edge. Comparing both letters, he could see no difference in the handwriting.

"I know old Stuart an' the boys were goin' away from the ranch yesterday," he mused. "They had their war-bags with 'em, too. An' to-day's the nineteenth. She says if I get this before the nineteenth an' Mrs. Kyle said a letter supposed to be from Louise was goin' to invite me out to the ranch so's they could wipe me out nice an' easy. But this handwritin' it's hers, I'll swear it's hers!"

Gilmore recinched his saddle and galloped to the station.

"Who brought this?" he demanded of the agent, thrusting toward the latter the envelope of Louise's letter.

"Billy Bobtail," replied the agent indifferently.

"Where's he, this Bobtail gent?"

"He ain't a gent he's a Injun, an' I don't know where he is. He might be 'most anywhere."

"Yuh shore know a whole lot, you do! When'd he bring this letter?"

"'Bout four days ago. I can't tell yuh no more'n that."

Gilmore departed in haste to seek the errant Billy Bobtail; but the Indian was not to be found. The storekeeper had caught him pawing within the confines of the prune-barrel, and had promptly shown Billy the error of his ways.

"Which I thro wed that war-whoop out on his ear," said the storekeeper. "The last I seen of him he was punchin' the breeze doo east. That was yesterday. If his cayuse holds out, he'd ought to be fordin' the War Ax right now."

The last sentence was spoken to Gilmore's retreating back.

"It's the nineteenth, an' it may be a blind; but I got to go, I got to go," Gilmore muttered as he sloshed his way to the Ace Saloon.

His wish was to borrow a fresh horse from Mrs. Kyle. He knew that the lady owned two good animals.

"She's went," the bartender said in answer to Gilmore's question. "Rode away two days ago. Didn't say where she was goin'. Said she might be back in a week, maybe less. Shore, yuh can take the other boss. The boss won't mind."

Gilmore's intention had been to ride alone to the Lazy D; but neither

Jimmy nor Nivette would hear of it.

"T's all right," yapped Jimmy, "don't take all the boys if yuh don't want to, but yuh ain't a-goin' out there without Smoky an' me an' a few others. No, y'ain't, not by a jugful! If we have to, we'll trail yuh. We're goin' see?"

So it was that Gilmore and a dozen men, mounted on fresh horses, rode away through the downpour. With the wet of thirty-six hours soaking their clothes and their skins, they pushed their steaming animals to the utmost.

The creeks were bank-full and over. What had been dry gullies were now rushing torrents of yellow water. Every depression was a pond. The face of the land was a sodden waste.

"See de Hash Knife from de top o' dees heel," said Nivette late in the afternoon of the following day.

At the time they were breasting a long, thinly wooded slope. Gilmore at once halted his men and rode forward alone. On the hilltop he took out the field-glasses and reconnoitered the ranchbuildings. They were not more than three miles away. A few horses stood in the corrals. Woodsmoke, beaten down by the hammers of the rain, pennoned raggedly from the kitchen chimney of the ranch-house. Evidently some one was at home.

Even as he looked, three riders dashed out of a draw beyond the ranch-house, galloped to one of the corrals, and dismounted. Stripping the saddles from their own beasts they roped fresh horses and saddled up.

"Must be goin' away in a hurry," observed Gilmore. "Now they're leadin' the hosses out an' tyin' 'em to the stockade."

He continued to watch as the three figures in the shapeless yellow slickers crossed to the ranchhouse and entered.

"Wonder where the other four are?" he said. "If I'd only got that letter day before yesterday!"

Suddenly the door of the kitchen popped open, and a man issued, walking backward. It was sufficiently odd that he should walk backward, but it was still more odd that he should be towing another man's body, gripping it by the ankles. Once the dragging head was clear of the sill the first man dropped the ankles and stepped quickly into the house.

Hardly had he closed the door when it opened again and a woman shot out with two men in pursuit. She ran well, that woman, but they caught her before she could reach one of the tied horses and dragged her, struggling every step of the way, back to the house.

Gilmore did not see her taken into the house. He had already bounded to his feet and torn off his soggy slicker and was running back to his horse.

He topped his mount with a rush, spurred across the top of the hill and plunged full tilt down the slope. The wiser plan would have been to return for his men, but Gilmore had no thought for either men or plans. He even forgot that Louise's letter might be a forgery. He only knew that a dead man had been taken out of the Hash Knife ranchhouse, and that a woman undoubtedly Louise Stuart had been mishandled, and stood in danger of further illtreatment. Whether the other riders were the Stuarts or other folk was immaterial. The accounting would be the same.

The hillside above the Hash Knife is not steep, but it is freckled with boulders, among which grow cedar and lodge-pole pine. Here and

there are outcrops and little ledges. Certainly that slope is one to be negotiated at a circumspect walk; but Gilmore took it full gallop. Without doubt Providence dropped everything else for the moment and devoted all her energies to the setting down and taking up of the feet of the impetuous young man's horse.

His teeth bared to the gum, panting like a runner finishing a race, Gilmore leaped the pony over a log at the bottom of the hill and barged down a cut-bank in a shower of mud and gravel into six feet of running water. The horse plopped out of sight, but came up snorting and gamely struck out for the opposite bank.

When his mount touched bottom, Gilmore sank in the spurs and laced the pony's hind quarters with his quirt. With a swish and a suck, the animal surged out of the water and clawed and scrambled up the bank to level ground.

Here Gilmore had sense enough to swing to the south, thus keeping a long swell between him and the ranch-house. A mile farther on he jerked his horse into a draw that he had marked from the hilltop. The western end of this draw was not more than a quarter-mile from the ranchbuildings, and any one riding toward the house would be concealed throughout the whole of his approach by the three corrals.

Ears flat back, desperate eyes rimmed with white, outblown nostrils showing red, the stronghearted little horse ran like wild-fire. He had to, for his rider quirted and spurred without ceasing.

But Gilmore was hardly aware of what his jabbing heels and flailing right arm were doing. His imagination had outstripped his racing mount, and into his brain was burned a picture of the ranch-house interior.

There were figures in that picture struggling figures. He saw Louise

Stuart dragged through the kitchen, through the dining room, into the living-room. He fancied he heard her shriek.

Gilmore's scalp prickled. The hair of his head stiffened and lifted like the hackles of an angered dog. The lust to kill swept through him in a great red wave.

Now he was nearing the corrals. He swayed back on the reins with such force that his horse, rearing, almost fell over backward. The rider flung himself from the saddle, tore the hat from his head, and raced along the stockade. As he ran, he pulled his six-shooter.

Spinning round the corner of the corral, he charged straight at the ranch-house. Deep in his throat he made odd, whining noises. His eyes glared like those of a madman. It may be that for the moment he was actually insane.

A few yards from the door he slipped and fell heavily. He rolled over and over like a shot rabbit, lunged to his feet, and sprang forward again.

The shock of the fall seemed to have blown clear the red fog in his brain. Instead of bursting open the door in the fashion of the bullheaded, unreasoning avenger, he paused in front of it, placed his ear to the latch-string hole, and listened.

;< There, yuh clawin' cat," the voice of Shaw was growling, "I guess yuh won't make no noise now! Yuh can just set there an' watch what happens to Mary jane!"

A cackle of Pan-like laughter shrilled but at the tail of the words.

"Ain't it luck, catchin' 'em both together?" cried Slim Dennison. "My gal an' yourn, Jack!"

"Where do I come in?" shouted Tim Simms, and laughed again hideously.

"You will all be killed for this!" Louise Stuart said clearly, unshakenly. "My father and brothers will be home almost any time."

"Will they?" snarled Shaw. "Well, Lou, pretty Lou, we'll gamble with yuh on that. If they come back before we're through, we lose. If they don't, you lose. I'll teach yuh to gimme the mitten! Wouldn't marry me, huh? I ain't good enough for yuh, huh? Well, when I get through with you, you won't be good enough to marry yore nice little feller, Dal Gilmore!"

Gilmore decided that the time had arrived to pull the latch-string. Holding his six-shooter in his right hand, he threw the door open with his left, saw before him the broad back of Jack Shaw, and instantly drove two bullets through it.

Slim Dennison had been holding Mrs. Maryjane Kyle against the wall, with one hand imprisoning her throat, the other round her wrists, and the sole of a heavy boot jamming down her two feet. At the thudding crashes of the double discharge he endeavored to get his gun into action. So did the marshal from beside the chair to which he had been making fast by the arms and legs a greatly disheveled Louise Stuart.

Gilmore, firing through the smoke swirling round the shoulders of Shaw's falling body, shot Tim Simms through the right eye at the precise moment that the latter let drive from the hip. Tim had always prided himself on his ability to shoot straight from the hip. It would have vexed him to know that his bullet had merely removed a small patch of skin from his opponent's cheekbone.

Whirling on Dennison, Gilmore found that worthy wrestling with Mrs.

Kyle, who, at the instant her hands were released, had seized the butt of his six-shooter. Gilmore effectively destroyed Slim's further usefulness in the melee by clipping him under the ear with his gunbarrel.

Mrs. Kyle leaned against the wall, panting, with both hands over her eyes. Beyond the drifting smoke-clouds Gilmore saw the face of Louise Stuart staring whitely at him. He ran to her.

"I--I knew you'd come!" she gasped, and fainted, her body sagging limply forward against the rope that bound her to the chair.

"She'll be around in a minute," said Mrs. Kyle, bending over the bed, on which the senseless form of Louise Stuart had been deposited. "There, there, Mr. Gilmore, don't look so worried. She's all right, I tell you!"

"Yo're shore it's only a faint? Yo're shore?"

"Of course I am. Heavens, don't you suppose I know what a fainting-spell is when I see it?"

"I s'pose yuh do," he replied doubtfully.

"You bet I do! Get me some more water and that other towel hanging there by the stove."

"I'd shore admire to know how you two came to be here all alone," he said, coming back with the water and the towel. "Stuart might 'a' left a couple o' punchers, anyway."

"Every last one of 'em's out on the range," explained Mrs. Kyle, bathing Louise's forehead. "The storm's drifting the cows toward the Triangle O, and the boys are busy. I guess Alec didn't think there'd be any trouble like this."

"I guess he didn't," Gilmore nodded. "I guess now maybe he didn't. Lordy, ma'am, I'm glad yo're here!"

"It's just luck. I was riding to Benson's ranch on some business when the storm hit me, and this was the nearest house."

And then Louise opened her eyes. Gilmore, on his knees beside the bed, caught his breath sharply. With a gesture as natural as that of a child she held out her arms.

CHAPTER XXXIII

MRS. KYLE stared at the two sitting shamelessly hand in hand on the long bench beside the fireplace.

"Well," she said at last, "I never would have guessed it never! And I guess," she added, as a shadow crossed the window, "I guess here comes somebody who never would have guessed it either."

The door was flung violently open, and in walked Alec Stuart, Lanky, and Bob. They were oilskinned and dripping. Their amazed eyes surveyed the two holding hands on the bench.

Gilmore grinned. Louise eyed her relatives reflectively, much as one would gaze upon so many specimens of some annoying insect.

"Well, I'd like to know began old Stuart.

"I just guess you would!" snapped Mrs. Kyle. "Of all the fools I ever saw and I've seen a few you're the biggest and the oldest! Didn't you know any better than to leave Louise here all alone with only Sing Fah while you went riding round? She'd been alone for a day and a half already when I came. It's just luck--"

"Wait, Mary Jane! I'll talk to him," interrupted Louise, slipping in front of Mrs. Kyle. "Dal, stay right where you are. I'm doing this!" Her amber eyes were sparkling. Her voice, when next she spoke, was low, but had a vibrant quality that emphasized every word. "Mary Jane tells me that you and Jack Shaw had planned to write Mr. Gilmore in my name inviting him here to the ranch. Once here, you intended to murder him. You needn't attempt to deny it. I know that it's true!"

"We we wasn't goin' to murder him none," uncomfortably pleaded old Alec. "We was goin' to hang him."

"That my own father could be so base is unthinkable! I'd expect anything of Lanky, perhaps, but not you. You always have fought fairly."

"But I tell you we didn't send him the letter. We--"

"I know you didn't, but I did." "You did?"

"I did, and he knew of your plan when he received it. In spite of that he came here."

"So I see," said the old man dryly.

"But there are other things you don't see," continued Louise, the knuckles of her clenched fists white against the tan. "You are not aware that a short time before Mr. Gilmore arrived, Shaw, Dennison, and Marshal Simms rode in. They killed Sing Fah when he tried to defend us, they tied me to a chair, and they threatened Mary Jane and me. Do you understand? They tied me to a chair, and they threatened both of us!"

A low growl issued from the throats of the six Stuart boys.

"Where are they?" demanded Alec Stuart in a terrible voice, his stubby mustache working with rage.

"You're interested now, aren't you? Oh, very much interested you are! Splendid allies, weren't they? Well, Mr. Gilmore arrived before anything really serious occurred. He shot Shaw and Simms, and knocked out Dennison."

"I wouldn't 'a' been able to do it so easy if Mrs. Kyle hadn't grabbed his gun," cut in Gilmore.

"It doesn't matter how it happened. What does matter is that Slim Dennison, hog-tied and chained to the anvil, is in the blacksmith-shop. You'll find the bodies of the others there, too. Shall I tell them now, Dal?"

Gilmore nodded, smiling, and stepped forward to her side. She laid her hand in his.

"It may interest you to know," Louise continued, "that I am engaged to John Dalling Drummond. Don't look so stupid, father! He's the son of the late owner of the Lazy D."

"But what are yuh holdin' this feller's hand for?" cried her puzzled parent.

"Because he is John Dalling Drummond--my Dal."

"Yore Dal? Yore Dal?"

"Certainly my Dal."

"You see, Mr. Stuart," said Gilmore, his blue eyes twinkling, "I thought if I came up here as a deputy sheriff, instead of as the owner of the Lazy D, I might be able to get at the bottom of the trouble in Glenn

County."

Alec Stuart batted his eyes sharply. Gilmore's rescue of Louise had spiked his artillery to the last gun. Obviously there was but one course to follow. He stepped forward, his hand held out.

"So far's the Hash Knife is concerned, there ain't no trouble at all in Glenn County," he announced. "Shake!"

"I'll answer for the Triangle O an' the Lazy D," said Gilmore as they solemnly shook hands.

"Ain't it one ring-tailed whizzer of a weddin'?" Jimmy observed to Smoky Nivette. "There's Tom Stuart eatin' beef with two Lazy D boys an' the Triangle O foreman. Old Alec an' Shorty Damman are camped down alongside a whisky-kag a-singin' 'The Bull-Whacker' an' lowerin' the liquor in the kag at the end o' each verse. There's six verses, an' they've sung the whole tune eight times so far. Come on, Smoky, le's go help 'em!"

"I am wit' you," said Smoky Nivette.

THE END

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